

NOVEL
6

Written by
Kennoji

Illustrated by
Matsuuni



DRUGSTORE in ANOTHER world

~ The Slow Life of a
Cheat Pharmacist ~



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CHARACTERS

EIJL

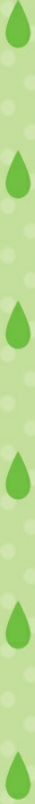
MINA

VIVI

PAULA

NOELA

REIJI



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Seven Seas Entertainment

CHEAT KUSUSHI NO SLOW LIFE:
ISEKAI NI TSUKURO DRUGSTORE VOL. 6

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TRANSLATION: Elliot Ryouga

ADAPTATION: Kat Adler

LOGO DESIGN: George Panella

COVER DESIGN: H. Qi

INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner

COPY EDITOR: Jade Gardner

PROOFREADER: Catherine Langford

LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: T. Burke

PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Melanie Ujimori, Jules Valera

PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Julie Davis

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Chapter 1:

The Collaboration

I'D ASKED NOELA to watch the store, but she was missing—although she'd been right next to me during breakfast.

"Mina?" I called. "Do you have any idea where Noela ran off to?"

"Oh... The fridge."

"Fridge" was what we called the giant metal box we'd made into a primitive refrigerator by spreading icy gel inside. It was next to the well-ventilated kitchen.

Noela was leaning against the fridge; I saw her fluffy tail poking out from beside it. Since it'd been hot lately, I didn't blame her. To be honest, I didn't know whether the current temperature was the result of a heat wave or if it was typical for the season.

"Groo..." Noela sighed.

"Hey, Noela. You're supposed to be watching the store."

"Garoo! Master! When you get here?"

"Are you serious?"

"Rei Reiiii!" a voice cried from the storefront. Paula from the tool shop had apparently dropped by. I'd come up with the idea of the special fridge unit, and the only one built was at my house, but it was Paula who'd had the fridge made thanks to her connections.

Deciding to let Noela enjoy the cool refrigerator a little longer, I headed back into the drugstore. "Why're you here?" I asked Paula. "To kill time again?"

"Don't be so mean! Here." She plunked a bottle of grape juice on the counter.

"Want me to cool it off in the fridge? All right, but it won't chill quickly. You'll have to let it sit a few hours."

"Then what's the point?! There *is* no point!" Paula yelled, slapping the

counter twice.

She's that disappointed, eh?

"Hey, Rei Rei—make something that cools drinks off *instantly*, okay?"

"You'd be better off asking a mage," I replied. *Not that you'd find one out here in the boondocks.*

"Just make a product that chills drinks perfectly, so people can enjoy them!" Paula insisted.

"You really think I can make that?" *Nope.*

Still, it *had* been weirdly hot lately. And, although the drugstore staff had easy access to cold water and food from the fridge, other locals didn't.

"Oh... Actually, we did have something like that on Earth," I muttered, remembering a machine that let people at least chill drinks faster than normal, if not instantly. "Hey, Paula, I've got to talk to you about something."

"What? Is it something *lewd*?"

"No." I grabbed a piece of paper and pen off the counter and drew a blueprint, explaining my idea.

"Huh? Whoa...I get it."

"Well, what do you think? If you got your artisan friends to build this—"

"This is a stroke of genius!" Paula exclaimed. I could almost see her visions of riches appearing in her eyes. "I can feel it... A revolution is coming...!"

"Oh, please."

"I'll go talk to my friends."

"Great. I'll get the icy gel ready here."

"If your blueprint works, I can manufacture these 'rotating coolers' and sell them to aristocrats for an arm and a leg... I'll be rich! Tee hee hee!" Paula giggled.

My icy gel would sell faster too. It'd be a win-win situation for the both of us. Back on Earth, I'd have described this rotating cooler as a collaboration of sorts

between the drugstore and tool shop.

“But will it really cool things off?” I wondered.

When I heard the cost of the rotating cooler prototype, I nearly fell out of my chair. “I-It was that expensive?”

“Yup,” Paula replied. “After this, we’ll either be on a one-way trip to spectacular failure, or we’ll have it made.”

“So there’s no turning back,” I mumbled. *Paula should’ve checked with me if the prototype was going to be this costly.*

I poured some room-temperature water from a pitcher into a metal container; Paula drank what was left. “Ugh. It’s lukewarm,” she cringed.

Spreading icy gel on the container’s outer surface, I finished preparing the cooler by pouring two packs of gel into the box that held the vessel. “Your friends made sure the metal was thin, right?” I asked, putting the container inside the box.

“I stressed that element,” Paula replied. “It should be fine.”

“Here we go, then.”

Paula gulped. I grabbed the box’s handle and started to rotate it. The gel-coated container inside the box likewise began to spin.

“Whoa,” Paula murmured. “Will this really work?”

“It...should.” I couldn’t help but feel my confidence fading a tad.

After I cranked the handle for a while, I let Paula do some of the work. Then I pulled out the gel-coated container. “Should be about ready... Jeez—it’s cold!”

Paula touched the vessel too. “Eek! It’s freezing!”

Removing the container lid, I poured the water into a cup. “Wow. It’s pretty chilly.”

Paula gestured to me. I nodded, handing her the cup of water. She took a sip. “It’s frigid! And all we did was turn the cooler’s handle a few times!”

I sipped the water as well. Sure enough, it was as cold as freshly melted snow.

Paula and I exchanged high fives, crying out, “We did it!”

Meanwhile, Mina and Noela silently peeked into the room, obviously wanting to know what Paula and I were up to.

“Come on, girls, give this rotating cooler a try,” I called to them. “It makes things really cold.”

“W-wanna chill this.” Noela held the orange juice Mina had bought her yesterday. Since the fridge was full, we’d put the orange juice elsewhere, and it’d warmed up.

“Try it out,” I encouraged her.

“Groo!” Noela poured her orange juice into the container. She cranked the handle as hard as she could, making a tremendously loud racket.

“Noela, you don’t need to put that much elbow grease into—”

“Wanna freeze it!”

Well, then. “Stop, fluffball!”

My cry finally gave Noela pause, and I showed her the right way to crank the cooler handle. When I flipped the container upside down afterward, however, no liquid poured into the glass.

“Huh?” I mumbled. “It’s not coming out.”

“Juice...gone?” The development reduced Noela to a state of shock.

“Wait a second...” I smacked the vessel a few times, and an orange object slid out. “It turned into sorbet!”

“Amazing!” Mina exclaimed. “So, this is a sorbet-making machine?”

Noela was silent, but her eyes sparkled.

“N-not quite,” I replied. “I guess that’s what happens when you crank the cooler as fast as possible, though.”

“I think this design will sell like hotcakes, Rei Rei,” Paula predicted. “I’m going to loop in more artisans and mass-produce these suckers! The easy life awaits

us! Bwa ha ha ha ha!” Cackling loudly, she left the drugstore.

I wound up selling the rotating coolers at Kirio Drugs. I explained how the machines worked to each and every customer, but people complained that they were too pricey. The coolers cost 30,000 rin each. Taking into account the production and material costs, that was about as low as we could go.

Paula was in the same boat, and rotating-cooler sales at the tool shop didn’t go particularly well either. *Guess it is what it is*, I thought.

Cue Elaine’s arrival at the drugstore...

“What’s this, Sir Reiji?”

Before I could explain the machine to Elaine, Noela took over. “Look, Drills! Spin. Chill.”

Elaine seemed confused. Noela hadn’t given her much of an explanation, so I stepped in and described the rotating cooler, showing her how it worked.

“This is amazing!” Elaine declared. “It’s so neat!”

“As long as you’ve got icy gel, you can chill as much juice, water, or liquor as you want,” I noted. Noela nodded along in agreement.

“I’d love one of these in our mansion!” Elaine told me. “I’ll take it!”

Paying in cash, the young noblewoman took the rotating cooler straight home with her.

Partly due to Elaine’s positive word of mouth, the cooler became quite a hot topic among the nobility. Increasing numbers of aristocrats visited Kirio Drugs to purchase one, and those same aristocrats then became familiar with the drugstore’s standard lineup.

Chapter 2:

Back to Zero

I PASSED NOELA her usual freshly concocted potion.

“Roo, roo, rooooo!” She happily chugged it down.

Watching, I reflected, *Nobody ever complains about my potions*. If anything, people just talked about how this world’s old potions had stunk and tasted like trash. They really seemed to appreciate the potions I made.

Noela flipped the bottle upside down and tapped the bottom to get the last drop out, then gazed at me. “What wrong, Master? Want drink?”

“Nah, I’m good.” Noela tilted her head, prompting me to ask, “Do you have any complaints about the drugstore’s potions?”

“Nope.”

She did love them, after all.

“But yes,” Noela added.

“Wait. Really?”

“Tasty *too* tasty!”

I stroked her head lovingly, then headed to the storefront. There, I found Ejil, uh, *dealing* with Annabelle.

“Hey! Woman! Are you here for the doctor’s drinks?!”

“What the hell’s your problem?!”

I pulled the demon king’s ears. “Stop calling her ‘woman.’ It’s rude.”

“Gah gah gah! Ow! D-Doctor?! Good morning!”

“Yeah. Morning. Morning to you as well, Annabelle.”

“Hey... Mornin’.”

Annabelle set the five potions she held against her chest on the counter. Like Noela, she loved potions so much, she practically couldn’t live without them.

“Those’ll be 6,000 rin!” Ejil snapped. “Not that you’ve got the cash for that.”

“Shut up. I don’t recall askin’ you to worry about my finances.” Annabelle handed Ejil six bills from her wallet. “Oh—and I’ll put the empty bottles outside the store like always.”

“That’s a huge help. Thanks.”

“No problem.” She turned to leave.

“Oh! Actually... Annabelle, I have a question.”

“Hm?”

“Have you got any feedback on my potions?”

“Feedback? Um... Not that I can think of.”

I hesitated. “All right.” I’d been considering tweaking the potions, but everyone seemed happy with them now.

Suddenly thinking of something, Annabelle clapped girlishly. “Actually, there’s one thing!”

“What is it?”

“They’re delicious.”

That was what Noela had said. “That’s good feedback, isn’t it...?”

“It’s not good or bad. See you later!” And with that, Annabelle left.

Can deliciousness be negative? Confused, I cocked my head.

“It’s true. The potions being *too* delicious might be a drawback,” I heard Ejil whisper.

“Why?”

“Well... When I first sipped one of your potions, I was flabbergasted,” he replied. “I thought, ‘How could this exist in the human world?’ I actually peed my pants a little!”

“Was that last part really important to tell me?”

“I’m the demon king, you know,” Ejil continued. “If I desire sweets, I have them brought to me. But those beneath me don’t have the same access to

desserts. For Noela and that redhead, sweet foods and drinks could be wildly addictive!”

I generally liked sugary things. Candy, fruit, all of them. Although Ejil referred to sweets as “addictive,” I couldn’t help feeling that described them a little too harshly. At the same time, I understood the idea that Noela and Annabelle loved sweets so much they just couldn’t stop consuming them.

Most rural towns in this world didn’t have access to desserts, although they were apparently sold in the capital. However, the syrup I’d developed sold like crazy, so people clearly wanted sweets in their lives.

“All told, what I’m trying to say is that the drugstore’s potions needn’t be as delicious as they are,” Ejil concluded.

“I think I see what you’re getting at.”

My potions healed external wounds and stopped blood loss. It was great that they were easy to drink, but at the end of the day, they were supposed to be medicinal. They didn’t have to taste good. And they cost 1,200 rin each—that was a fair price for medicine, but pricey for people who drank potions as beverages like Annabelle or Noela.

“If someone needed a potion to save their life, it’d be awful if somebody else was sipping on it as a refreshment,” I mused.

“Precisely,” Ejil agreed. “Imagine if the drugstore ended up low on potions when people needed them most?”

“I get your perspective now. In that case...” Thinking, I went silent for a moment.

Ejil gazed at me respectfully. “Doctor, have you got an idea?!”

“Yeah, a basic one. Watch the store for me?”

“Of course!”

When it came to Noela, Ejil was pretty much worthless, but he really was great to talk with about more serious topics. I patted his shoulder, turning to head to the lab.

“On Earth, *those* were really getting popular,” I recalled. “So, if I do *this* with

that...

My medicine-making skill told me what ingredients I needed and how to mix them. I followed its internal instructions carefully, and bam, I was done.

Potion Zero: Stops blood loss. Works on external wounds. Zero calories.

It looked exactly like a potion. I took a sip; the flavor was totally different.

Potion Zero had just the faintest hint of sweetness, but it wasn't nearly as saccharine as a normal potion. Its aftertaste was probably more refreshing, and creating it was much cheaper.

"It's like flavored water," I murmured. "A less sugary potion with the same effects..."

We'll call Potion Zero "PoZe" for short and price it at 800 rin.

Noela entered the lab, sniffing the air. "Master make another potion?"

"Yup. A brand-new type."

"Groo! Noela try!"

I handed her the PoZe bottle. She held it in both hands and took a big gulp.
Now, how will the fluffball react?

After finishing the potion, Noela looked at me meaningfully. "No worry, Master."

I paused, bemused.

"Everyone make mistake. Everyone."

So that's why she's staring at me. "That wasn't a mistake."

"Groo?"

"It was exactly the kind of potion I wanted to make."

"Tasteless. Not tasty taste."

"I flavored it like that so people won't just buy it as a refreshment."

“Prefer regular potion.”

“I’d call this successful, then.”

“Aroo?” Confused, Noela cocked her head.

In the drugstore, I arranged several PoZe bottles on a shelf, putting up a small sign that read, “Unsweetened PoZe shares a regular potion’s health effects and costs only 800 rin.”

“So, Doctor, you made a slightly less flavorful potion?”

“I’d call it significantly less flavorful, truthfully,” I replied.

“And it’s even cheaper,” Ejil observed. “I knew you’d come up with a magnificent idea!”

A few days after I launched PoZe at the drugstore, our clientele was unsurprisingly split between people who liked the original potion and people who didn’t mind PoZe, so long as it was cheaper and its effects were the same.

Annabelle herself wasn’t fond of PoZe. “Hey, Pharmacist, these new potions of yours ain’t too appetizin’! Still, they’re definitely the ones to pick for my men.”

After all, as mercenaries, the Red Cat Brigade needed tons of potions—and Annabelle’s forces had complained about her drinking too many.

Frowning, Annabelle reached for the PoZe bottles. “I’ll have to buy normal potions with my own pocket money from now on...” she muttered.

Man, she really is addicted to potions, huh?

At any rate, the drugstore’s normal potion sales dipped a little, but PoZe sold well enough to make up for that.

“For this price, I can always keep two or three bottles in the house, just in case,” a customer had said.

Among our buyers were also folks who truly enjoyed the cheaper alternative; it was quite popular with customers who lacked a sweet tooth. One told me, “PoZe’s refreshing and even easier to drink than the other flavor.”

I guess I shouldn't be too surprised. There are people who aren't crazy about sweet things. I just forgot because I'm not one of them.

So, just like that, the drugstore's lineup got a power-up.

Chapter 3:

Bubbles High Above

IT WAS JUST PAST NOON on our regular day off.

I was spacing out in the living room when I heard a pleased voice in the kitchen. “Noela! Look, look! Rainbow balls!”

“Garrooo!”

“Aw. When you touched them, you popped them!”

“Again, Mina! Again!”

I peeked into the kitchen, curious about what the girls were getting excited about. I spotted Mina and Noela at the sink, making suds with dish detergent.

“Rainbow balls”? And they pop when you touch them...? Ah, yeah, I see what they’re doing.

“Soap bubbles are fun, huh?” I called out.

Hearing my voice, the girls turned around, confused expressions on their faces. One after the other, they tilted their heads.

“Soap bubbles?”

“Boobles?”

“Uh... You’ve never heard of them?” *Huh. Guess bubbles aren’t a thing in this world.*

“Master can make?!” Noela asked with sparkling eyes, tugging my pants.

“Pretty easily, actually.”

“Pop?”

“If you touch them, yeah. They’re just bubbles, after all.” They were extremely fragile.

Unfortunately, Noela seemed deeply disappointed. “So, boobles tricky... Even for Master...”

I bet she's never blown bubbles before. If I'm just going to hang out in the living room all day, why not have some fun?

"Okay, I know what we'll do this afternoon," I told them. "Leave it to me, fluffball."

"Amazing, Master!" Noela said admiringly, wagging her soft tail back and forth.

"Are you going to make rainbow balls, Sir Reiji?"

Mina's eyes are sparkling with excitement as well. I guess she's never blown bubbles either. "That's right. You'll get a turn too, Mina. Just hold on a bit."

"Absolutely!"

Shouldering the girls' expectations, I gathered the necessary ingredients and holed up in the lab. Making liquid for bubbles that didn't pop when touched wasn't too hard, since it didn't include anything special.

Bubble Liquid: Fluid required to blow sturdy bubbles.

Perfect. All I needed to do to blow bubbles was cut a small hole in the end of a straw.

"Let's give this a try." I put some bubble liquid on the straw and blew through it, toward the sky. Then...

Blup! Blup! Bluuuuup!

Just like that, several large, iridescent bubbles were floating in the lab.

"Mission accomplished," I said to myself. *How many years has it been since I last blew bubbles? Maybe not since I was a little kid...?*

"Garrooooo! Look! Tons of boobles!"

Noela rushed through the lab door, wagging her tail. She must've been watching curiously the whole time. She poked one of the bubbles I'd blown.

"Whoa! Be careful," I warned. "If you jab them hard like that, they'll pop."

Except they didn't.

"Master! Amazing! No pop!" The bubble Noela had poked floated peacefully through the air and bounced into another one. Noela slapped it back with her tail. "Groo!"

Boing. Boing. The bubbles smacked against each other, drifting all over the place.

Whoa. They really aren't bursting at all.

Mina came in to check on things. "Ah! You should've told me you finished!" she exclaimed, poking at the bubbles immediately.

"That's not really how you're supposed to play with bubbles, but...eh."

Smirking, I locked on to a bubble floating in front of me. *I bet it'll pop if I do this...*

I clapped my hands together as if I were killing a mosquito, but the bubble simply flattened and slid from my palms.

If these bubbles are that sturdy, no wonder they don't burst when you touch them.

"Let's head outside," I suggested to Mina and Noela.

Carrying the bubble liquid and straw, I guided them out of the house.

"This is how you make bubbles." I repeated the same thing I'd done with the straw and bubble liquid earlier, this time in front of the girls.

"Garooroooo! Tons of boobles all over!"

I handed Noela the straw. She blew into it quickly, producing a giant bubble.

"Dang! That's huge."

"Oh my! Look how big it is, Noela!"

As we watched from the ground, the bubble rode the wind high into the air, floating away.

You know, bubbles are fun, no matter how old you get. I nodded like some old fart.

Soon, Noela pulled on my sleeve. “Master! Want to ride one.”

“Er... Excuse me?”

“Then Noela can fly!”

“That’s impossible.”

Even if Noela got inside one of the super-sturdy bubbles, it was too fantastical to think it would still float through the air. *Though...it feels awfully hypocritical considering things “fantastical,” since I live in a fantasy parallel world...but that’s not the point.*

“I’m sure it’ll work!” Mina interjected, as if safeguarding a small child’s dream.

Noela herself was ignoring my uncertainty, so I agreed, “Let’s give it a shot, then.”

I poured bubble liquid into a cooking tray, twisting some wire into a “U” shape so we could blow an enormous bubble, and then dipped the wire in the liquid.

“Ready, Noela?”

“Bring it!”

I raised the wire and swung it over Noela, enclosing her in a bubble from head to toe.

It’ll either burst or just dissolve. Or so I thought.

Noela hopped slightly off the ground, and the bubble’s edges joined fully under her feet. “Groo!”

“Amazing! Noela’s floating!” Mina cried.

“Isn’t there gravity inside that bubble? Th-this is unbelievable!” *Or is the bubble liquid just that durable?*

However, no matter how much Noela poked and prodded the bubble, it showed no sign of bursting. Still, I guessed that it would pop if she really ripped into it.

A gust of wind blew by, and Noela began floating through the air in her bubble.

“Bubbles certainly are amazing, Mr. Reiji!”

Er...I'm pretty sure they aren't supposed to work like this. “Noela! That’s dangerous. Come back down!”

Unfortunately, she didn’t appear to hear me at all. *Is that because she’s inside the bubble?*

Mina and I simply watched Noela, smiles on our faces. Then another wind gusted, blowing her higher in the air and farther into the distance. *Just how far will that bubble drift? I’m getting major balloon-floating-away vibes now.*



“M-Mr. Reiji, er... Will Noela be all right?”

If that bubble popped, even Noela wouldn't come away completely unscathed, as spry and athletic as she was. “Sh-she might not be,” I admitted. “Griffy!”

I headed to the stable where we kept our griffin, Griffy, so I could rush to Noela's aid. Once I got on its back, we took off in a hurry. The bubble didn't stand a chance of outflying us, considering the griffin's incredible top speed.

Griffy and I aligned ourselves with the bubble.

“Noela! That's dangerous! Get on Griffy.”

Having enjoyed her aerial outing to the fullest, Noela reached over to us. I grabbed her hand and sat her behind me as the huge bubble burst.

Whoa. That sure was something. Talk about an insanely tough bubble.

“Master! Noela flew!”

“It was more like you were *sent* flying.”

“One more booble! One more booble!”

“Not happening. It's too dangerous. No more bubble-flying.”

“Groo?!”

“You're not *supposed* to fly in those.”

I had Griffy descend, and Kirio Drugs came into view. Back on the ground, Mina had used a straw to blow a bunch of bubbles.

“*That's* how you're supposed to play with bubbles,” I told Noela.

“Aroo...” She seemed displeased. “Make flying treatment later, Master.”

“I can't—” But my medicine-making skill reacted, explaining the ingredients and process to create such a product. “I guess I *can* make something like that...”
Not that I will.

And so, I got Noela back home in one piece.

I went on to sell the liquid as a product for making bubbles. At first, I had to explain what those even *were*, but once I did, they became instantly popular with kids.

Before putting the bubble liquid on sale, I made a point of watering it down a lot to ensure nobody else tried riding inside one.

Chapter 4:

Fizzy Tasty Taste

ONE AFTERNOON, I realized I hadn't drunk a particular beverage since coming to this world. *It doesn't exist here, obviously*, I reflected. *So, what can I do...?*

As I sank into thought, my part-time employee Vivi poked me. "Reiji, what's wrong?"

"Uh...actually, you might be able to help out with this, Vivi."

"Really? I'd love to, if I can!" Vivi took a deep breath. She seemed delighted that I was going to rely on her for something.

"So, my problem is..." I tried to pick the words to explain the drink properly.

Vivi lit up. "Oh, that? Yeah, it exists!"

"Oh? I knew I could count on a real lake fairy."

"I'm a lake *spirit*, darn it! How many times do I have to tell you?" She frowned at me.

Sorry, Vivi, but I'll keep doing that as long as you keep having fun reactions. But it wasn't like I was going to say that out loud.

"That stuff's deep in the mountains, though, Reiji. Getting there will be really tough," Vivi warned.

"Can't you help me?"

"Nope." Then, something seemed to occur to Vivi. "B-but you won't fire me just because I can't help, will you...?"

"Of course not. That'd be awful. I don't recall becoming that kind of crappy boss."

"Thank goodness." Vivi sighed in relief.

She and I could afford to chitchat like this, since things weren't particularly busy today. Heck, Noela was even sleeping on the counter.

Noticing this, Vivi shook Noela to rouse her. "Wake up, Noela! You're

supposed to be working!”

The werewolf girl kept napping soundly. “Groo...”

For the record, Kirio Drugs wasn’t busy every single day. Sometimes, it was just Annabelle visiting for her daily potions, followed by a few other folks, and then nobody else would come for the rest of the day. Today was like that.

“Shall we close the drugstore early?” I asked Vivi.

“Huh? B-but I was looking forward to today’s shift! I-It’s already over?”

Vivi commuted to the drugstore from a mountain lake. She didn’t get to interact with people often, so she really seemed to look forward to shifts here.

“Let’s go look for the drink you said was in the mountains,” I suggested. “We’ll ride Griffy to cut down on travel time.”

“Gr-great!” Vivi pumped her fist in the air.

Noela finally rose from her slumber. “Garroo? Master, what happen?”

“We’re going to go look for something.”

“Some thing?” Noela tilted her head. Since she’d been asleep, she hadn’t heard any of my conversation with Vivi.

Anyhow, I got ready to head out, explaining the situation to Mina.

“Does that kind of thing really exist, Mr. Reiji?” she asked.

“Mm-hmm. I promise you’ll be shocked when you have some.”

“Is it dangerous...?”

Incapable of even imagining the beverage, Mina simply seemed bewildered. I didn’t blame her; I remembered being shocked the first time I had some too. Just imagining her reaction nearly made me burst out laughing.

“Watch the shop for me, okay, Mina?”

“Of course! Not that I expect any customers to drop in.”

Even if there were some emergency, Mina knew how to handle things. She was excellent at both chores in the house and managing the store, and I couldn’t have been more grateful to her for that.

Mina hurriedly made us sandwiches so we'd be fine even if we came back a little late. After packing necessities in my bag, I was ready to go. I pulled Griffy from its stable, and Noela, Vivi, and I got on its back and rode off into the sky.

We had to travel deep into the mountains Vivi had told me about, even though this drink was something that any old vending machine on Earth would've had on hand.

"You really think we can find some around here?" I asked Vivi.

"I don't think it'll be worth coming all this way for," she responded.

This spirit totally doesn't get it. Although I figured it *was* true that, by itself, the thing I wanted wasn't particularly tasty.

"Groo? Arroooo?" Noela peered at Vivi and me, confused. "No secrets, Master. Tell."

"We're here to look for tasty tastes," I replied.

"Perfect."

That's that. Explanation complete.

We hiked across the pathless mountain, following a small river to our destination.

Vivi pointed at a spot where water was welling up. "That's it there, Reiji!"

At first glance, it looked like she was pointing at ordinary water. If she said it wasn't, however, she was probably right.

"Water, Master!" Since I told Noela we were looking for "tasty tastes," she seemed annoyed at Vivi's discovery.

Maybe I set the bar too high... I quickly touched the rising water. *Yup, this's the stuff.*

"It's really not all that good," Vivi warned.

"Different from tasty taste?" Noela inquired.

As the pair beside me spoke, I poured some of the water into the grape juice

I'd brought.

"Reiji, that juice is good because it's so concentrated," Vivi objected.

"Yeah, but if you put some of this water in..." *Then it should become...*

I sipped the new mixture.

"Ah! This is it!" The grape-flavored liquid in my mouth fizzed. "Delish!"

"Garooooo?! Tasty taste? Tasty taste?!" Noela demanded, eyes twinkling.

"Give it a try." I handed her the container.

She took a sip immediately. "Arroo!" Her eyes were wider than ever; she seemed astounded. Gulping, she opened her mouth with a look of deep concern. "Garoorrooo! Mouth hurt, Master! Bad!"

The fizzing sensation must've been so strong that Noela thought something happened to her mouth. "You won't get hurt drinking something carbonated."

"Car-boon-ate-ted?"

"Carbonated."

When Noela passed Vivi the sparkling grape juice, the lake spirit was skeptical. "Is it that good?" Nonetheless, she took a sip. "What the—?! It's delicious, but it's all fizzy...! I could get used to this stuff."

"Right?"

Deciding to take a break, we sipped the carbonated grape juice and indulged in the sandwiches Mina made us.

Noela was warming up to the new product. "Master! Noela want more tasty taste right away!"

Coming all this way was a bit of a pain... Ah, wait! I'm so stupid! Why didn't I think of this from the get-go? "I can make it myself!" I muttered. "At the lab."

"Garoorroooo! Go home! Make now!"

"I'll help too, Reiji!"

The three of us hopped on Griffy and flew home.

Mina came out to greet us. "Welcome back!" she called. "That didn't take

long.”

“Yeah, well, I realized I could make the stuff myself, so I’ll give it a shot,” I explained.

I headed to the lab with Noela and Vivi in tow. The process wasn’t complex enough to need their help, so I decided to have the fluffball and lake spirit serve as taste testers.

Sometimes you just need a carbonated drink, you know?

I followed my medicine-making skill’s instructions, and bam! It was done.

Sparkling Grape Juice: Grape-flavored carbonated beverage. Sweet and delicious.

“Noela. Vivi. You’re up.”

I handed them each a bottle. They chugged the carbonated juice down.

“Fizzy tasty taste!”

“This is so good!”

I also took a sip. *Yeah—it’s even better than what I made up in the mountains.*

I brought Mina some so that she could try it as well.

“Mmmm!” she gasped.

Ha ha ha! She’s blown away.

“M-Mr. Reiji, what is this? It’s like grape juice...but it’s different!”

“It’s carbonated, my dear.”

“It’s shocking. But I liked it!”

Good. Mina’s on board.

I made a few test bottles of sparkling grape juice and had customers try the beverage the next day. At first, I sold people who liked it a bottle or two, and they spread good word-of-mouth around town. Soon, the carbonated juice

became a household item.

I'd been wise to make the sparkling grape juice inexpensive enough for children. Kids started popping in nearly every day to buy a bottle. The sparkling juice came to be even more popular than the potions.

As for Noela, she wound up confirming that she truly preferred the latter.

"Mmm... At end of day, potions best."

Chapter 5:

That One Cliché Scene

PAULA HAD APPARENTLY been twiddling her thumbs at the tool shop, and she once again visited the drugstore to kill time. She pulled out a chair and sat at the counter like she owned the place. She clearly planned to spend a while here.

“Hey, Rei Rei! Rub my shoulders for me, will ya?”

“Not happening. *You* might have nothing to look after, but I certainly do.”

“Boo.” Paula frowned at me.

Just then, Ejil came out of the lab, check sheet in hand. “I finished looking at the stock, Doctor.”

“Thanks.”

“Oh—I also assessed the last few months’ sales records and crunched the data for you. Feel free to check it next time you make a new product.”

“Whoa. Really? You’re a lifesaver.”

“It was nothing.”

He’s so thoughtful for a demon king. And he’s seriously as capable as Mina. I really trust him as an employee. But...

“Fine, fine,” Paula said impatiently. “Rub my shoulders, Ejil!”

“Psssh! Don’t make me laugh, woman! I serve only the doctor and Noela. Don’t get too big for your britches!”

As you can tell, Ejil tended to be rude to everyone but me and Noela (who was out shopping with Mina). Since he was the demon king, he was extremely proud and often got on a high horse with other people. He wasn’t haughty with normal customers, but Paula wasn’t normal.

“Oh my.” Paula grinned. “You’re really refusing, huh?”

Uh-oh. What's she thinking?

"And it's not that you *won't* rub my shoulders," she continued. "You just *can't*, can you?"

"Hrmph! You really think I can't rub shoulders well? You underestimate me!"

Ah. I get it. She's using Ejil's attitude against him. When it came to thinking up a cunning plan or get-rich-quick scheme, Paula was quick on the uptake.

"Then give it a try. Or... What, are you afraid of massaging a woman? Are you too awkward? Embarrassed?" She was also good at picking a fight.

"Silence, fool! I shall one day have the world in my hands! Touching a female body is nothing to me!" The demon king totally took the bait.

As Ejil began rubbing Paula's shoulders, I looked through his report. *Okay. So, according to Ejil, those sell way more than I thought, but these over here aren't a priority...*

"What's the matter?" Paula asked. "Nervous because you're touching a girl?"

She's great at this. I practically heard her cackle with each word.

"Hmph! Like *your* body makes me nervous!"

Hook, line, and sinker, I mused.

"Ah," Paula sighed. "You aren't so good at that, pal."

"Argh! Where're your pressure points?!"

"A little lower. Ah... Yeah, that's not bad."

"Curses! How dare you insult me!" Ejil didn't like being rated simply "not bad," apparently. "How about *this?!*" The poor guy pushed with all his might on the pressure points in Paula's shoulders, completely focused.

"Hey, Rei Rei, how're *your* shoulders?"

"Mine? Totally fine."

"Does the drugstore have any shoulder pain treatments?"

Women seemed to complain about shoulder pain often, I noted. Even Mina did, if I remembered correctly. "Actually, if I tweak a product I made recently, I

might come up with something close enough.”

“Wait, for real?” Paula stood straight up.

“Hey, what’re you doing?! Don’t move!” Ejil complained.

“You’ll have to strip, though,” I added.

“Er... Wh-what?”

“Yup.”

Paula blushed.

“Don’t tell me you’re embarrassed after demanding the doctor make you a new treatment, woman. He’s trying to help you out!” Ejil yelled.

“Sh-shut up! Just keep rubbing my shoulders!”

“Gah ha ha ha!” Ejil laughed victoriously.

“It shouldn’t take long to make,” I told Paula. “Hold on a bit.”

I entered the lab. Adjusting the process for making sparkling grape juice, I created a new product.

Fizzy Bath Time Fun: Produces carbonic acid when dissolved in warm water, promoting circulation in the body.

I brought the bottle back into the drugstore. Ejil was still rubbing Paula’s shoulders. *How long will she make him do that? Ejil, you realize you can just stop, right?*

“All done!” I cried.

“Whoa, for real? That was fast!”

“C-can I stop now? My strength is fading...” The poor demon king had massaged Paula so long, it’d worn him out.

“That’s good, Ejil,” I assured him. “Nice work.”

I sat Ejil down in the chair Paula had occupied. It didn’t look like customers

would drop by anytime soon, so it'd be okay to let him rest in the store.

"Well, how's this product work?!" Paula demanded.

"You can use it here at the drugstore," I replied. "Let's go to the bathroom."

"Rei Rei, you big perv!" She covered her face with her hands dramatically.

"You've been waiting to do that, haven't you?"

"Aw, you're no fun."

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever." Brushing off Paula's comment, I led her to the house bathroom. "Here's a towel."

"Oh...okay. I've actually got to undress, huh?"

"Yup."

Paula looked a bit like a deer in headlights. On the other hand, I basically didn't think of her as female, so I wasn't really nervous about her stripping. I had prepared warm bathwater so she could use the treatment right away.

I handed her the Fizzy Bath Time Fun. "Put this in the water."

"That's all?"

"Mm-hmm. Just tell me how well it works afterward, okay? If you enjoy it, I'll make more."

"Hunh." She stared at the bottle. "Rei Rei, when you peep at girls bathing, who turns you on most? Mina?"

"I've never peeped at anyone, okay? Why do you even assume I *have*?"

"I mean, you're gonna peep at *me*, right?"

"No, I'm not. Seriously. See you later," I replied, leaving Paula alone in the bathroom and heading back to the storefront. *Honestly, I think the reason I'm not really attracted to her is because she's so quick to imply something dirty.*

As I got back to the drugstore, I heard a yowl from the house. "Nyaaaaah?!"

Ejil turned to me. "Doctor, was that...?"

"It was a ghost cat."

“No... I’m fairly certain it was Paula! Stop playing around.”

“The carbonic acid must’ve surprised her.”

“Shouldn’t you go check on her? That product was a prototype, after all. What if something happened?”

“E-er, well, uh...”

The new products I created using my medicine-making skill had never caused any serious incidents...but Ejil was right. Nervous, I immediately rushed to the bathroom.

“Paula? Are you okay? Hey!” I called to her from outside the bathroom. However, there was no response.

Mina wasn’t around right now, and depending on what was happening in the bathroom, I figured time might be of the essence. “I-I’ve got no choice.”

I bit the bullet and entered, only to find Paula in the bath. We made eye contact. The Fizzy Bath Time Fun had worked properly; the tub was full of bubbling suds.

“E-er...” I gasped.

“Y-you actually came to peek at me?!”

“Gah!!! No, I swear!” I spun around immediately and fled the bathroom, yelling to her behind me, “Y-you should’ve said something while I was outside the door!”

“I *did*!”

Seriously? Damn it! Now she’s got something on me. Going forward, I’d have to do as Paula said since she could threaten to tell Mina or Noela about this. *It’s over. I’ve been defeated.*

“This bath’s super warm and cozy, Rei Rei!” Paula called.

“Huh? Oh. Yeah. Good.”

“My shoulders and neck were really tense before, but now they feel great.”

My new product seemed to work as expected. However, I’d thought Paula would double down on messing with me, and her response was quite the

opposite. *What the heck just happened?*

Some time after I headed back to the drugstore, Paula emerged from the bathroom. “If you make more of that, I promise I’ll buy some. See ya!” She waved her hand and left.

I did end up bottling more Fizzy Bath Time Fun for Paula—or rather, for any customers with aches and pains. The product soon sat on the drugstore’s shelves right beside the tangerine bubble bath, and Mina grew fond of it as well.

A few days later, I heard on the grapevine that I apparently walked right into Paula’s trap. Supposedly, she’d laughed as she told the story. “I mean, he had the nerve to be like ‘*Your* naked body’s no big deal’ or whatever, you know? So, I thought I’d mess with him a little.”

No wonder she hadn’t answered me from inside the bathroom. Fortunately for me, Paula had decided not to treat me like some peeping Tom, since I’d obviously felt so guilty. She knew I’d come in because I was legitimately worried about her.

At least, that was the excuse I told myself whenever I remembered what happened that day.

Chapter 6:

The Secret Base

NOELA HAD PUT UP some kind of column outside, near Griffy's stable. I could see it from the house.

What the heck is that thing? I kept an eye on it, curious, while letting her do as she liked.

The next day, there was another column. Noela gazed at them, pleased with her work.

That's number two, I mused.

The following day, she put up another column—the day after, another.

What's she plotting? It didn't seem to be anything bad, so I figured I'd just watch her from afar.

Mina, however, couldn't contain her curiosity. "What exactly is Noela making?" she asked, sipping a black potion, when the werewolf girl wasn't around.

"They look like columns made of wood she collected here and there," I replied. "Where'd she get all the lumber, though?"

Mina didn't seem to know. "I suppose all we can do is keep an eye on her. Tee-hee!"

"Yeah. Guess so." Like me, Mina was probably excited to see what Noela would create.

The next day, the legendary carpenter Gaston dropped by the mysterious construction site, leaving some tools behind. *Noela really is trying to build something.*

Noela dragged a sheet of fabric from who-knew-where toward the columns, then draped it over the top of it all. She apparently had no idea we were watching her work.

"Hey! Pharmacist!" someone called from the storefront.

I headed into the drugstore only to find Gaston waiting there. “Welcome. Here for energy potions?”

“Yeah. Three, please.”

“Right away.”

As I prepared Gaston’s order, Mina served him tea, asking, “Do you happen to know what our Noela’s up to?”

Gaston sipped the tea and cackled. “It’s a secret, apparently. But she wanted to borrow some tools!”

“Sorry for all the trouble,” I sighed.

“It’s no trouble at all! I just lent her some spare ones. They’re no skin off my nose. That said, if her project’s supposed to be secret, she probably should’ve picked a more secluded place to build whatever it is!” Gaston chuckled again.

Yeah, he’s right. Still, if Mina and I asked Noela what she was making, she’d probably just tell us it was a secret too.

After the carpenter headed home, a hammer clanged outside. As I’d expected, Noela was hard at work; she was nailing the sheet to the wooden columns.

“I just hope she doesn’t hurt herself,” Mina sighed. “What could she possibly be constructing?”

I thought I had a good guess, and Gaston probably did too. “You know. One of *those*,” I muttered. “I totally get it.”

“Huh? You figured out what she’s making, Mr. Reiji?”

“I’ve just got an inkling. I might be wrong.”

“Hmm.” Mina still seemed to have no clue.

I figured it was one of those “bucket list” things pretty much all young boys wanted to build, which might’ve been hard for Mina to imagine, since she was a young woman. That said, Noela was also a girl...but maybe her inner adventurer was calling to her.

“Garroo roo roo!” Noela hammered the sheet into another column, securing

it. Her project was coming together.

“Looks like I’m right,” I murmured.

“Aw. Hurry up and tell me what she’s making, Mr. Reiji!”

“Probably a secret base.”

“Er...a what?” Mina didn’t quite seem to understand.

Come on, Mina. “She’s realized that a secret base epitomizes joy and adventurous spirit. So now, she’s building one.”

“But we have a *house*. Why does she need a base?” Mina *really* didn’t get it.

As we talked, Noela trotted from the yard into the house. I heard her enthusiastic voice. “Garroo!”

She loudly shuffled some things around, then carried her backpack and favorite pillow to her secret base, tail wagging happily.

“Oh—she took her pillow! It’s going to get all dirty!” Mina cried.

I stopped her before she went outside. “Look, let the girl dream.”

“Gracious! I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

The more I sympathized with Noela, the angrier Mina seemed with me. *What the heck?*

Just as I wondered what Noela was up to in her secret base, she suddenly appeared in the drugstore. “Come, Master!”

“Er, what’s wrong?”

“Just come!”

Pulling my arm happily, she led me to the structure she’d built. “This Noela’s house!” She introduced it so proudly, I could’ve sworn I heard a triumphant video game sound effect.

She really did make herself a secret base. “Awesome, Noela!”

As I praised her, she huffed proudly and pulled up the sheet, inviting me into her abode. “Come in! Come in!”

“Pardon the intrusion.”

The secret base's ceiling was low; I had to bend over as I entered. The interior was only about the size of a tatami mat, but that was part of its charm; secret bases were supposed to be small. Inside, some straw served as carpeting. Noela had set her pillow and backpack in the corner, as well as three empty potion bottles.

"Sit, Master."

"Huh? Oh. Uh, sure." I plopped down on the straw flooring.

She fished through her backpack, presenting me with a potion. "Drink."

"Thanks." *Is this her way of treating me like a guest...?*

"Groo! Noela sleep here tonight."

"You'll catch a cold."

"No problem."

Really? Noela didn't have a private room; she shared one with Mina. *Maybe she just wants her own place?*

"Garroo roooooo!"

Man, she's in such high spirits. Maybe, rather than her own room, she wanted a space she'd made herself.

"What about dinner?" I asked.

"Noela eat here."

"You better tell Mina ahead of time."

"Gr-groo..." Noela seemed to imagine how that would play out. Her face stiffened.

It was getting late. Poking my head out of the base, I saw Mina preparing to close the drugstore. I couldn't leave her with all the work, so I exited the structure.

"So, what's Noela doing over there?" Mina inquired.

"Not much." *I mean, she really isn't.*

There wasn't really anything *in* Noela's base. Everything she did there, she

could just as easily do in the house. Still, I understood feeling attached to someplace you'd built yourself. Having built it yourself was what was great about it.

"I'm going to get dinner ready," Mina said.

"Right. Thanks a lot."

She headed to the kitchen, leaving the store to me.

Noela had taken along some single-use light sources—a drugstore product that shined when spread out on a surface. How did I know that? The interior of her secret base was all lit up.

"She's really going to spend the night there," I mumbled. *Dang.*

Once I wrapped things up in the store, a delightful aroma from the kitchen found its way to me, telling me that dinner was just about ready. I kept an eye on the base, and Noela finally emerged. She must've caught a whiff of the food too.

"Noela eat there," she told me.

"Can't you just eat here and then head back?"

She shook her head. *Seems like she's not going to listen.*

In the dining room, Noela put the meal Mina had cooked on a tray.

"Eat here, please," Mina said.

"Noela eat there."

"No."

"Garoo!"

"Eat dinner *here*, please."

"Then... No need food." Noela turned her back on us, annoyed, and stormed away.

"Don't come running to me if you get hungry!" Mina cried.

The werewolf girl didn't react to her threat, holing up in the secret base instead.

Later, Mina looked concerned.

“Don’t worry,” I told her. “If Noela gets hungry, she’ll come back.”

“Will she...? I might’ve been too hard on her.”

Noela could be pretty stubborn. She probably wouldn’t listen to whatever we told her right now. *There is something exciting about the idea of living alone in your own secret base. Still, she should understand that’s not realistic soon enough.*

Mina and I were eating dinner at the table, one person short, when the wind suddenly began to gust rather strongly.

“I hope Noela’s base will be okay,” I muttered, looking into the darkness. Lo and behold, her “house” was perfectly fine; the single-use light source glowed inside it.

“Why do you think secret bases are so amazing, Mr. Reiji?” Mina inquired.

“Hmm. That’s kind of hard to explain.” I thought for a moment. “I guess a secret base makes you feel grown up. The two of us always tell Noela what to do. When she’s in her base, though, nobody bugs her. A secret base is kind of like a fun, unused attic you can sneak into.”

“An attic, huh...?” That seemed to resonate with Mina. Still, she was grumpy that Noela had wasted her homemade meal. “I think I understand that, but is it any reason to turn down dinner?”

“Look, I’ll talk to Noela later,” I assured her.

As we discussed the situation, the wind picked up. *I should tell Noela to come in soon. It’d be dangerous if something went flying into her base.*

Just as I headed outside, I barely made out Noela’s shocked voice. “No... D-disaster!”

I saw that the secret base was on the verge of collapse. The sheet waved wildly in the wind, and one column had toppled over completely. Noela held another up, just barely, preventing the whole base from caving in.

“Oh, no! This is terrible!” Mina shouted behind me. We rushed outside to help Noela.

“Noela!”

“Master! Not good!”

“I can see that!”

“We just need to hold this one, don’t we?” Mina asked Noela, pointing at the wobbly column.

“Groo! Yeah! Please help, Mina!”

“Of course!” Mina gave her a hand steadying the pillar.

I thought she’d tell Noela to come back into the house, but she’s really pitching in.

“Master! Column, please!”

“No prob. I got this!”

Noela and I managed to reinstall the fallen column, but soon, it almost toppled over again. I wound up sitting and holding it steady. Mina also did her utmost to keep Noela’s secret base intact.

“Close call.” Noela wiped sweat from her brow. After Mina and I arrived, she’d run back and forth supporting the other two columns.

“Looks like the wind’s slowing down,” I noted. It was just a breeze now. Unfortunately, about half the straw on the floor of the base had blown away. *What was up with that wind, anyway?*

“Yeah,” Noela sighed and bowed her head to us. “Master, Mina, thanks.”

“Aren’t you feeling hungry?” Mina asked.

A strange sound erupted from Noela’s stomach. *What the heck was that?*

“N-not really,” Noela replied. It must’ve been hard for her to admit it, since she’d turned down Mina’s cooking earlier.

Mina left for a few minutes, then came back with bread and soup.

“Mina...” Noela mumbled.

“Here. That’s...um...if you’re peckish.” Mina giggled gently.

Noela quickly gave her a big hug. “Thank you, Mina! I...I sorry!”

“Don’t apologize. I should’ve realized how important this base was to you.” She gently rubbed Noela’s back.

The base was a bit cramped for three people. Still, hanging out there with Noela and Mina was pretty fun.

Noela devoured her bread and sipped her soup. “Have some, Master!” She presented the bowl to me.

“I’m all right. I had some already.”

“Oh. Sure.” She went back to eating it. Mina watched with a maternal smile.

“Hey, Noela?” I added. “Mina works really hard every day to cook us food. So, we’ve got to make sure to eat it, okay?”

“Groo... Noela know.”

“Also, it’s usually fine to play in here, but not at night or during work hours. It’s dark and dangerous at night, and I want you to concentrate at work. Okay?”

“Groo.”

And so, we set the rules for Noela’s base in stone. She came back to the house attached to the drugstore as agreed and woke up there the next day.

After breakfast, just as I was about to open the drugstore, I heard excited children’s voices outside, followed by Noela’s screech. “Arrrooooo?!”

I left the house to see what was happening and found local brats standing over Noela’s now-demolished secret base. *Oh, man...*

Trembling with the fires of vengeance, Noela sprinted into the distance after the kids. “You destroy secret base! Now Noela destroy you!”

“Secret base? Pssht! Lame!!!” a kid yelled back.

“You call *that* a secret base?”

“It was just a bunch of sticks!”

“Noela...destroy...you!”

Right, right. A secret base usually did look pretty ramshackle to everyone besides the person who built it. I watched Noela pursue the local brats,

enraged. *Man, why are all secret bases doomed to be destroyed by other people, even in this world?*

Chapter 7:

An Outdoor Essential

THE WHOLE “SECRET BASE” THING lit the fire of creativity under Noela’s butt. Today, she was testing construction ideas for a *new* base in the yard. Truthfully, I had no clue what the difference was between this base and her first one.

“Groo...”

“Hey, Noela, what’s going to be unique about this base?”

“Everything! Master no see!”

Welp, now she’s mad. I found that cute in and of itself, so we’d had this back and forth several times.

Little engineer Noela slapped her tail against the ground, her expression troubled. “If rain, get wet. If wind blow, fly away. Arroo...”

She could just stay home from her base on rainy and windy days. “Well, you always have to deal with that kind of stuff in a secret base, right?”

“Groo? Master think of solution?”

How do adventurers usually handle the rain and wind? They operated outdoors, so I figured they just took cover wherever they could to sleep. *Ugh. That sounds awful.*

“Hey, Rei Rei, Noela!” Paula sauntered down the hallway from the drugstore. “I sensed a chance to collaborate and came on over!”

“I think you sensed a chance to make money,” I retorted.

“Tee-hee! You got me!” Paula seemed proud.

I was hardly praising her. Still, I couldn’t make what I was picturing without her help. “Paula, do adventurers carry camping equipment?”

“How do you mean? Like, a portable base of operations or something?”

Yeah, I guess you could call a campsite that.

“Along those lines,” I replied, explaining Earth’s concept of “camping” to Paula. “I thought adventurers might like equipment for that, you know?”

“Awesome idea!” she replied, smiling ear to ear.

I’m sure she can tell camping equipment would turn a profit.

“Master! Heard everything.”

“Oh?”

“Noela want!” Unlike Paula, Noela looked deathly serious. I wouldn’t have to go far to find someone to test the prototype.

“All right. Let’s rock. Once we’re done, you’ll get first dibs, Noela.”

“Groo! Camping! Camping!”

If Paula and I successfully created what I had in mind, it’d solve all Noela’s problems. She could carry it around, and it wouldn’t get waterlogged in the rain. As for hard winds, well, it’d withstand those better than the wooden columns she’d set up for her old secret base.

“I’d love to collaborate with everyone in town on this,” I told Paula. “If all goes well, it might become Kalta’s own local specialty.”

Paula nodded. *No objections, I guess.* The tool-shop owner loved her hometown, after all; whenever something happened in Kalta, she was the first to try to turn it into a big event. To be honest, I admired the part of her that always attempted to do things for the town.

“I really misjudged you, Paula.”

That clearly didn’t make sense to her. She stared at me blankly. “Huh? What’re you talking about all of a sudden?”

I left the drugstore to Noela and Vivi, and Paula and I headed to town.

“I set up a meeting hall for the townsfolk,” she told me. “Let’s gather them there.”

“Meeting hall?” I repeated. “When the heck did you do that?”

Apparently, she’d renovated one of Kalta’s empty houses. “Heh heh heh! It’ll be amazingly useful, right? When we planned that last event, I thought about

how much easier it'd be if we had someplace to meet and discuss things."

The "event" she was talking about was a big elimination tournament we held using fire extinguishers—"Erasers," as we called them here. *Where'd Paula get the cash for a meeting hall, though? Don't tell me she raked in the dough from the tournament...?* Lord Valgas *had* said he'd introduce the "Erasers" to merchants in other towns. *Huh.*

"Anyway, I bought one of those empty houses dirt cheap," Paula added.

"So, you totally made bank on the tournament, didn't you?"

"Kalta's gonna crank out these, uh, 'tent' things," the tool shop owner continued. "We'll make 'em a must-have for adventurers the world over!"

I'd always had the impression that Paula was money-grubbing. But what if she was actually a first-class businesswoman? Or, at least, had the potential to be? My opinion of her quietly improved.

After Paula and I waited for a while at her meeting hall, Alf the general store owner and some carpenters and craftsmen arrived, making a total of eight people including Paula and me. *This really is like a local business association.*

"Um, thanks for coming here today," Paula began. "We're going to discuss the potential of these 'tent' things Rei Rei thought up."

After she'd announced the topic of the gathering, I explained what a "tent" was and what materials were necessary to construct one. Tents consisted of two primary elements—a canopy made of fabric and a frame forming the tent structure. I drew the whole thing on a sheet of paper.

"I see, I see," one "business association" member responded. "With something like this, adventurers could take refuge in the rain, aye?"

"We'll build 'em together and sell 'em!" another exclaimed.

Everyone seemed to be discussing the tent blueprint enthusiastically, rather than addressing its challenges. While they talked things over, Paula told me quietly, "Everyone here knows we've held tons of events thanks to cool stuff you designed. A lot of people have made money because of you. I know this blueprint will go over well with them!" She giggled.

“Pharmacist, for the tent frame, will iron rods be good enough?”

“Pretty much,” I replied. “Something light and durable would be best, though.”

“That means bamboo’s the only way to go.”

Hmm. Bamboo’s flexible and tough, so it might just be perfect.

“What fabric should we use, Reiji?” Alf asked.

“It needs to last. Something water-resistant would be best.” If nylon were available, it’d be perfect, but I doubted it existed in this world.

“Leather lasts a while,” said Alf. “But it contracts when it gets wet.”

“No worries. Kirio Drugs carries water repellent. If we just spread some of that...”

The clothing-store owner interrupted me. “Pharmacist, what if we make fabric from repellent-soaked thread?”

“Ah, great idea! We can even apply repellent to the finished tent to increase its water resistance.”

Our meeting continued on productively.

Fine-tuning the business association’s Kalta tent was going smoothly. Different frames and fabrics went back and forth. Today, I was heading to the meeting hall to look at the latest prototype.

As I left the drugstore, Elaine called out to me. “You’ve visited town quite a bit lately, Sir Reiji. Is something going on?”

“Uh, we’re designing a tent.”

“Tent...?” the young aristocrat cocked her head.

“Tent almost ready, Drills!” Noela exclaimed.

That statement did little to illuminate poor Elaine. “R-really...?”

Noela’s probably trying to tell Elaine that she should wait till the tent’s done. That’s not getting across, though.

“See you later,” I said to Noela, leaving the drugstore behind.

I totally understood why everyone in the business association liked the tent production plan. Although folks visited Kalta during events, the town was in the middle of nowhere. If we hadn’t held events, there wouldn’t have been any tourism. And apparently, no adventurers used tents or anything similar right now. So, selling tents could definitely attract visitors to Kalta.

I entered the meeting hall and greeted the business association members. “Hey, everyone! Thanks for all this hard work.”

Several people were already checking a prototype frame’s strength. “If it’s too thin, the whole tent will be more fragile,” an artisan pointed out. “But the frame doesn’t bend as easily if it’s too thick. It could snap...”

I tried bending a section of the disassembled frame. As the artisan had said, thin tentpoles curved easily, while thicker ones didn’t bend at all. They seemed more likely to break as I applied more force.

This issue had come up because I’d asked that the frame be collapsible. Carrying an assembled tent around would get in an adventurer’s way. The problem was, a collapsible frame was definitely less sturdy overall.

I pulled a new product from my bag. “I made this. What do you think?”

Protective Coating: Increases any surface’s durability. Provides glossy finish.

“What’s that, Pharmacist?”

“It’s easiest just to show you. Let’s see...”

With everyone’s eyes on me, I brushed the protective coating on a slim prototype tentpole. The product reflected the light beautifully; the middle-aged men of the business association seemed shocked.

“What an incredible finish!”

“Whoa! It’s so clear and pretty!”

“It’s really shiny!”

“That’s not actually the protective coating’s main purpose, though,” I pointed out. After letting the coating dry, I grabbed the tip of the rod and bent it with all my might. *Screeeech!*

“You’re bending it a ton!”

“It’s definitely curving!”

“It’s not snapping, though.”

Thank goodness. I hadn’t been able to test the protective coating myself in the lab first, since I didn’t have a prototype frame there, but clearly it was very effective.

“We won’t need to apply the coating to thick sections of the frame,” I explained. “All that matters is that the thin upper rods bend.”

I picked up the slender tentpole sections that made up the top of the frame, applying the protective coating, then grabbed and attached the four thicker pieces. The others supported the frame carefully, but the connected tentpoles worked as I’d expected. *Voilà!* We’d completed the tent frame.

“Is this finished?!” the artisans exclaimed.

“Ph-Pharmacist, ain’t this tent frame done?” one added disbelievingly.

I was as surprised as he was. Moved, even. Just as I’d requested, the artisans had created connecting tentpoles that curved slightly, which ultimately made them easy to assemble. “Yeah, pretty much!” I replied. “You guys created a better frame than I expected.”

The men looked a bit embarrassed at my straightforward compliment.

“All right, let’s drink today!” one cried.

“Hell yeah!”

That was how things usually ended at the business association. All that was left to do was to see how the tent’s water repellent material worked when exposed to water.

At that point, Paula rushed over holding a handkerchief-sized rag. “Gah ha ha

ha! Guys! Look at this!” She turned to me. “Ah, you’re here too, Rei Rei? Perfect timing.”

“Is the tent cloth ready?”

“Yup! Hit it with an Eraser.” She passed me a water gun.

I pumped the handle, loading the ammunition-water. “Ready! Aim!”

“Tee-hee! Bring it.”

The onlookers gulped in anticipation as I fired the Eraser at the fabric Paula held. The water jet struck the cloth directly but bounced right off.

“Whoa!” everyone exclaimed.

I ran my finger across the fabric’s smooth surface. Not a single drop of water had soaked into it. “W-well, that was just one shot from the Eraser,” I pointed out. “Until we push this fabric to the limit, we won’t know how much continuous water exposure it can take.”

Splash. Splash. Splash. I emptied the Eraser onto the material, but it did great; it wasn’t soggy by any stretch of the imagination.

To test the fabric’s resilience further, I plunged it into a bucket of water. Soon, it floated back up to the surface. It was so waterproof that droplets just sat on top of it.

The others were thunderstruck by the results.

“That water repellent’s ridiculous!”

“It kept the fabric bone dry.”

I originally made the water repellent for umbrellas and armor; I was glad it was still proving useful.

“Dang, the tent frame’s all done?!” Paula demanded, finally realizing what we’d been up to.

I patted it. “Check it out, Paula. I’d like you to waterproof enough fabric to cover this thing right here.”

“Roger that! I’m on it, babe!”

“No kidding, babe!” She’s got me talking like her now.

A few days later, Paula finished the tent fabric. She brought the material all the way to Kirio Drugs, so I carried it to the meeting hall.

We decided to assemble the prototype outside. The canopy had sleeves for the tentpoles to slide through. As I put the tent together, Paula and the business association members involved with the project watched curiously, along with Noela and Elaine.

When I told the two girls that the tent design was basically complete, they couldn’t help but want to check it out.

“Tent ready, Master?”

“Th-this is a tent?”

“Yup. Just hold on a sec.” I finished passing tentpoles through the fabric, connected rods here and there, and then staked the entire prototype to the ground to stabilize it. “Okay. Finished.”

Not too bad at all, I thought. *A classic tent, if I do say so myself.*

“We made this together...!” I heard a business association member exclaim, sounding impressed.

Even Paula seemed genuinely moved.

“Well, remember, this is just the prototype,” I reminded everyone.

Noela wagged her tail excitedly. “Groo! Tent finished!”

“Th-this is a tent,” Elaine stammered again as Noela immediately crawled through the tent entrance.

“How is it in there?” I called.

“This secret base! For sure!”

“I just don’t see the point of something like this,” Elaine said. “When would one use it?” Despite her confusion, she followed Noela into the tent. “W-wow! It’s way more spacious than I expected. This...this is a secret base!”

Peeking inside the tent, I saw Noela rolling around. “Arroo! Gonna sneak snacks in.”

The business association guys wanted to look inside the tent too, so I had the girls swap spots with them. In the end, everyone had the same general reaction; they were surprised and moved by the product of all their hard work.

I was the last one to go inside the tent. *In terms of comfortable resting conditions, I’d say this could fit about two men or three women.*

We already tested the fabric’s water resistance, so all that was left was to see how tough this thing was. If it broke or collapsed in strong winds, it’d be useless.

“I brought Griffy, Mr. Reiji!” Mina walked the griffin up to the tent.

“Kyu! Kyu!”

“All right, Griffy. I need you to really beat your wings and get some wind going. Can you do that for me?”

“Kyu!”

We all moved to stand behind Griffy. The griffin flapped as powerfully as it could, whipping up wicked winds that gusted into the prototype tent. The tent creaked and rustled from the force.

“Griffy! No destroy secret base!”

Noela’s desperate cry weakened Griffy’s flapping. “Kyu?”

“Noela, we’re testing the tent right now. Keep going, Griffy,” I told the griffin.

I was relieved when it resumed fanning the tent forcefully. “Kyu! Kyu!”

Fwoosh! Fwoosh! Fwoosh! Despite the powerful winds buffeting it, the tent was doing fine.

Ten minutes later, Griffy slowed its pace, having exhausted itself. “K-kyu...” The tent was in good shape.

“Pharmacist...?”

“Rei Rei...?”

“Master...?”

“Mr. Reiji...?”

“Sir Reiji...?”

“Kyu kyu...?”

Everyone waited for me to say the words. I looked at all their faces and nodded. “The tent’s done!”

Cries of joy erupted from the crowd.

Kalta Tent: Standard tent. Easy to assemble and carry. Light, sturdy bamboo frame. Highly water resistant. Provides excellent shelter from rain.

Chapter 8:

Creature Comforts

“HOW ABOUT THIS?!” Vivi called.

Ejil quietly watched Noela from the bushes. The werewolf girl was in the middle of putting together one of the tents Reiji and the town’s artisans had created, and her coworker was helping her stabilize the tent.

“Stake there!”

“You got it! What about this part?”

“Stake!”

“Aye, aye!”

Mikoto, a girl from town, was also there, helping secure the tent according to Noela’s orders. Both Noela and Vivi had the day off, so along with Mikoto, they’d decided to set up a small day camp beside the river. Elaine had wanted to join them, but her father—the lord of the area—hadn’t let her, much to her sadness.

“If the doctor was so curious, he should’ve come as well,” Ejil whispered to himself.

Although he was fine with the girls’ plan overall, Reiji was concerned for their safety, so he had asked Ejil to watch over them in secret. “I’m sure they’ll be okay,” he’d told Ejil, “but just to be safe, could you check on them?”

“Certainly. I’ll quietly stalk—er, *observe* them from the shadows.” Ejil had already felt listless due to Noela’s absence, so he couldn’t have asked for a better opportunity.

“This might seem odd coming from me, Doctor,” Ejil had added, “but if you’re so worried, why not come along yourself?”

“It just wouldn’t be right,” Reiji responded. “The girls want to kick back together, so I should leave them alone.”

“I see... That’s your thinking?”

“It might not make sense to you, but yeah. So, you better not get caught, got it?”

Thus, at Reiji’s request, Ejil secretly followed the girls.

“Hee hee! I’ll never be caught! If I put my mind to concealing myself, there’s no way three little girls will notice my presence! Ga ha ha ha!” It didn’t take the demon king long to begin cackling in the bushes.

“Arroo?”

“Ack!” he cried, hastily covering his mouth in a panic.

“What’s up?” Vivi asked Noela.

The werewolf girl looked in the direction of the sound. “Heard weird voice.”

“Did you hear anything, Miko?”

“Not a thing.” Mikoto shook her head.

Noela narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

Continuing his surveillance, Ejil cackled again. “Hee hee! Normally, Noela would sniff me out. But the river apparently affects her sharp sense of smell!”

“Garrooooo! Tent finished!”

“That was easier than I expected!” Vivi exclaimed.

Assembling the tent took the girls less than ten minutes. The three entered the structure quickly, cheering.

“So that’s the tent the whole town united to design, eh? The doctor certainly came up with something fascinating!” Ejil noted. “I’ll have to do some negotiating to see whether the demon army can use it.”

The demon king desperately wanted tents of his own. A small room that provided cover from rain and could be rebuilt anywhere was terribly tempting. To him, it was a massive deal that the invention was waterproof; that alone would keep his soldiers energized and strong. The fact that tents could shelter his men from the wind was an added—and much appreciated—bonus. Reiji’s team of artisans had even gone to pains to make the water-repellent tents from materials that were easy to carry.

“Tents will be a must-have when we make troops sleep outside,” Ejil muttered. “Now, what’re those girls up to? They’ve yet to come back out...”

Were they napping, perhaps? Ejil snuck closer, which allowed him to eavesdrop on the young women.

“Hey, Noela, is there anyone you’re, like, into?” Mikoto asked.

“Garoo? ‘Into’?”

“I-I wondered the same thing...”

Anyone Noela’s into...? Ejil focused his ears on the tent.

“What ‘into’?”

“Aw...for real? *You* know, right, Vivi?”

“Y-yeah! Come on, Noela. Miko wants to know if there’s somebody you I-like.”

The conversation was oddly stilted; Vivi and Mikoto clearly felt a bit embarrassed and shy about raising the subject.

“D-don’t tell me my name will come up...?!” Ejil gasped...but it didn’t.

“Definitely Master!” Noela announced.

“I figured. I could never beat the doctor.” The demon king slumped his shoulders.

Then, however, Mikoto continued. “No, no. Not like that.”

“Groo?”

“That’s not how you’re ‘into’ the drugstore owner.”

“That not...?”

“Liking someone is simple. But Miko’s question is a bit different,” Vivi chimed in.

“Noela like Master,” the werewolf insisted.

Ejil was deathly jealous. He was practically turning green with envy.

“Anyone *Mikoto* into?” Noela asked then.

“Er— Wha...? Um, no. No one.”

“Groo?” Noela seemed doubtful.

“You’re totally interested in *somebody*, Miko,” Vivi agreed. “Come on. Spill the beans!”

“Th-there’s no one I’m into! Jeez!”

As the three girls chattered loudly in the tent, Ejil finally realized that what Reiji had said was true. “So, Doctor, *this* is what you meant about the girls ‘kicking back’ together. They would never discuss these things if they knew either of us were here right now,” the demon king observed. “Your observational skills are second to none!”

Ejil felt that hiding was worthwhile if he got to overhear these kinds of conversations. Still, he wondered whether the girls intended to spend the whole day trip in the tent. As he grew curious, the three emerged.

“Build fire.”

“Got it!”

The girls dispersed to collect firewood.

“Noela only brought that tent and some food. Can she really make a fire?” Ejil watched, concerned.

“Vivi! Make flame.”

“What? I’m not able to.”

“Mikoto! Make flame.”

“I didn’t bring a flint or fire life stone!”

Ejil could have just started a fire with a spell, but none of the girls knew how to use magic.

“I suppose I’ll have to pretend to pass by, then help her out,” Ejil told himself. At that point, however, the demon king remembered the bag Reiji had him bring. He dug through it until he found what he was looking for: Hell Flame, a Kirio Drugs product that was a must-have in the girls’ situation. Reiji had also packed a fire life stone—a cheap magic stone that produced flames when

magical energy ran through it.

Ejil trembled at his employer's skillful guesswork. "Is the doctor clairvoyant or something?!"

Meanwhile, the three girls gathered in front of their firewood, the atmosphere decidedly bleak.

"Can't heat dried meat," Noela said sadly.

"How do you even start a fire?" Vivi wondered. "Sorry. I wish I could help more." Hearing the lake spirit give herself a hard time briefly caused Ejil to reflect on how annoying she could be.

"Should've packed better," Noela interjected.

"Yeah!" agreed Mikoto. "This isn't your fault, Vivi."

"Guys..."

Still, Noela and Mikoto's kindness didn't change the girls' situation.

"Looks like I've got no choice," Ejil concluded. "Use this, Noela!"

Fwoop! Fwoop! Thonk. He threw the Hell Flame and fire life stone toward the werewolf girl, rolling them skillfully just past her feet.

"Groo? C-can't be." Noela picked up both objects, looking shocked. She held them toward the other girls as if she'd pulled a legendary sword from a stone. "These on ground!"

"Oh my gosh!" Vivi cried. "What an amazing coincidence!"

"Now we can start a fire!"

The atmosphere brightened as the girls lit the firewood with the stone and Hell Flame. The drugstore product worked perfectly, and flames spread quickly across the kindling. The three chatted before the fire, occasionally taking a second to peer into the flames.

"I guess I'm not the only one who never gets sick of gazing into a fire..." Ejil nodded quietly in the bushes, remembering occasions when he'd camped outdoors with his troops.

He rummaged through the bag, curious about what else Reiji had packed, and

found that it also held “Bye-Bye Bug Queen” insect repellent. “Makes sense. Noela does hate bugs.”

The bag also contained a water purifier for clean drinking water, as well as Hot-Hotter-Hottest, which produced steam that instantly warmed objects. There were also a few bottles of black potion for anyone who enjoyed complex flavors, as well as some syrup.

“You might’ve been more concerned about the girls than I thought, Doctor,” Ejil mused. Still, those *were* all things that served a purpose outdoors.

While the girls were busy focusing on the fire, Ejil edged closer to them, using the bug repellent on their surroundings to keep pests from drawing near. Just as the demon king began sneaking back to the bush, one of the many things Reiji had packed in the now-open bag fell onto the ground with a thud.

“Groo? What that?”

This was bad, Ejil realized. There was no time to pick up the item and vanish. In fact, he might as well leave the bag itself behind so the girls could use what they wanted, when they wanted.



Ejil immediately tossed the bag away. The loud thud it produced drew Noela's attention. "Arroo! Over there now!"

"What is it?! Is something there?" Mikoto cried.

"I can't stand m-monsters," Vivi said nervously. "J-just because I'm a spirit doesn't mean I can fight, all right?"

"Leave to me." Her guard up, Noela carefully closed the distance between her and the bag.

"I'm pretty sure we don't have anything to worry about," said Mikoto, who now sounded as though she knew something the others didn't. When Ejil turned around, his eyes met the girl's. Mikoto gestured for him to book it, and he dove soundlessly for nearby cover.

"She's something else," he muttered.

Once Ejil had had a moment to catch his breath, the girls located the bag.

"Groo! This Master's bag!"

"Reiji's?" Vivi asked. "Really?"

"Sure. Smell Master."

"Then did he drop by earlier...?"

Mikoto—the only person present who knew that Ejil had brought the bag, not Reiji—giggled to herself. "What's in it, Noela?"

The question prompted Noela to dig through it. She found all kinds of useful drugstore products. "Master definitely bring!"

"I've seen this water purifier and Hot-Hotter-Hottest at the store," Vivi agreed. "Those'll help a bunch!"

"You're sure the drugstore owner brought this stuff?" Mikoto asked, barely hiding her laughter.

"Groo? This Master's bag. Noela know. Smells like Master," Noela replied. She sniffed the bag thoroughly. Soon, her expression darkened, and she narrowed her eyes. "Other scent too."

Ejil nearly jumped. “I-Is she finally aware that I’m here?”

Reiji had told him to keep his visit secret, so he had done his best to conceal himself. Still, he couldn’t deny that he was a little happy that Noela had picked up on his presence.

“Smell Ejil,” Noela announced.

“Really?” Vivi gasped. “On the bag?”

“In that case, Noela, he probably brought you this bag because he was worried.” Mikoto shot a glance toward Ejil.

“Don’t look over here! You’ll give me away,” Ejil muttered. Despite his nervousness, he was deeply grateful for Mikoto’s kind comment. It felt like he at last had someone on his side. “Thank you, young lady.”

“But this *Master’s* bag,” Noela objected.

“Ejil borrowed it, then.”

“Arrooooo,” the werewolf girl grumbled with a conflicted expression.

“There’s even black potion and syrup in here, Noela! We can have refreshments!”

“Groo! Great. Drink! Watch fire!”

“I like the sound of that!” Mikoto agreed.

The three returned to the campfire by the tent.

“So, uh, I know I said I liked the sound of it, but what is a ‘black potion’ anyway?” asked Mikoto.

“You’ve never had any? It’s a drink adults really like.”

“Noela drink lots. Adult,” Noela attempted to brag.

Preparing to boil some water, the girls arranged a few large stones in a “U” shape. Vivi poured river water into a small pot she’d brought, adding the purifier. “Now we won’t get sick.”

“Once done, water hot. Mellow,” Noela told Mikoto.

“You mean, the water will have a mellow flavor?”

“Groo.”

The three tossed some firewood onto the stones, then set them ablaze and placed Vivi’s pot on top. It didn’t take the water long to boil.

“I brought cups. We can use those.”

“Groo! Mikoto prepared.”

“Yeah!”

The young ladies poured black potion into their cups, then mixed in hot water, followed by some syrup at the very end.

“You combine the black potion with hot water?”

“Reiji taught us that it’s easier to drink that way,” Vivi explained.

“Noela drink unmixed.”

“But didn’t you complain that it was too bitter last time?”

Ejil also remembered Noela trying to choke down a cup of black potion.

The girls clinked their cups together and cheered. *Siiiiip!*

“Ah...” they sighed.

Time drifted by slowly for the three. The occasional bird chirped in the background as the gentle sounds of the river and popping firewood filled the air. The atmosphere was enough to take your mind off your day-to-day life, and the girls looked as if they were having tons of fun.

“I-I wish I could join them,” Ejil whispered sadly to himself. “I also...want friends... Friends I could spend time with outdoors on a day off...”

He cried quietly within the shadows of the foliage.

The girls packed up as the sun lowered, since Reiji had told them strictly to be back by sunset. They returned to the drugstore in the evening; needless to say, Ejil came in not long afterward.

“Home, Master!”

“Welcome back, Noela. You too, Ejil.”

At Ejil's name, Noela spun around.

"Yeah, I'm back," the demon king mumbled.

"Sorry about everything today," Reiji told him.

"No, it was no problem."

Noela hopped up and down as if she wanted to say something. "Master! Master! Camp fun!"

"Glad to hear it. How'd the tent work?"

"Easy! And Master's products big help!"

"Oh, the stuff I had Ejil bring you?"

"Arroo?!" Noela turned her gaze to Ejil to confirm this.

"You're the one who packed all those products, Doctor," said Ejil. "All I did was bring the girls the bag."

"Ejil follow?!"

At that point, Reiji looked surprised. "Wha...? You mean, the girls didn't catch you?"

"Nope." Well, Mikoto had detected him, but...

"Really? I could've sworn you were going to get found out."

"Doctor, please don't assume from the beginning that I'll fail at a task."

"Ejil's the one who brought you that drugstore stuff, Noela," Reiji told her. "You should say thank you."

"Groo..." Noela looked displeased, but then she bowed her head slightly, reluctant to ignore Reiji's request. "Ejil, camp fun thanks to you."

"N-N-Noelaaaaaaa!" Ejil closed in recklessly, attempting to embrace her; he got whacked with her tail instead. "Gaaah!"

"Hate." Noela glared daggers at him.

"You just can't get her to come around, huh?" Reiji asked with a pained smile.

Chapter 9:

Originals and Knockoffs

EVERYONE IN THE business association had put their noses to the grindstone to create a great tent prototype. At this rate, though, the adventurers we wanted to sell the tents to weren't going to come purchase them. The thing was, adventurers visited Kalta once in a blue moon. They definitely didn't frequent the town.

I dropped in on Lord Valgas carrying one of the new tents, which I assembled on the lawn.

"This is called a tent, Father!" Although she'd had literally nothing to do with the tent's creation, Elaine explained its purpose to her father proudly. "Sir Reiji and all the town's other artisans teamed up to make it."

Valgas crawled into the tent. "Ah! I see." He emerged impressed. "Heh heh! I can certainly imagine this becoming a must-have for adventurers. Mm...Sir Reiji, you did well, coming up with such a fantastic idea."

"I'd like a famous adventurer to use one," I told him.

"You plan to sell it to them at a high price, don't you?"

"No, not at all."

Elaine hesitated; she seemed puzzled.

"You're not?" Count Valgas asked, similarly confused.

I swear, like father, like daughter. "I want to give them one to use for free. Theoretically, a well-known adventurer could basically advertise Kalta's tents."

Online multiplayer games on Earth worked that way; people were always after the same items and equipment strong players owned. *So, you know, if some famous adventurer uses a tent...* And if the adventurer realized that the item was actually useful, that'd be a one-two punch.

"If people start using tents more widely, they'll become a Kalta specialty, right?" I pointed out.

“A unique specialty for a middle-of-nowhere town like Kalta...” Count Valgas brought his hand to his chin. If the tents caught on, they would directly help to increase the domain’s tax revenue.

“They’ll sell even faster if we say they’re produced by the same guy who makes the new potions,” I added.

“That’s a fantastic idea. However, Mr. Reiji, there’s one problem. Personally, I don’t know any adventurers,” Count Valgas said apologetically.

“I see...” *Well, the first adventurer to use a tent doesn’t necessarily have to be famous.*

“In that case, leave this to me! Tee hee hee!” Elaine stepped forward with her chest puffed out and chin raised. “I’ve met the noble adventurer known as Lord Lars. Rumors of his undertakings have done the rounds in Kalta and San Logro!”

Lord Lars? I feel like I’ve heard that name before... “Oh, right!” I exclaimed. “I forgot he’s an adventurer. I remember you being excited to meet him at that dinner party.” *Yeah, he was the guy Elaine initially wanted to wear that perfume for.*

“Y-yes, that’s right.” Elaine turned toward me, starting to panic. “Please don’t get the wrong idea, Sir Reiji! I no longer have any feelings for Lord Lars, b-but it just so happens that he’s an adventurer now. It isn’t that I’m trying to reconnect with him, I-I promise! I’m a one-man sort of woman. Um...”

The more Elaine talks, the redder she gets. “If you know him, perfect,” I replied. “We’ll use this Lars guy.”

“Mm, good idea,” Lord Valgas agreed.

“In that case, Sir Reiji, your representative needs to meet with him and describe the town’s specialty product,” Elaine informed me.

She wants me to break down how tents work for Lord Lars? “You can explain for me, Elaine.”

“Me...?”

“Yeah. I listened while you described the tent to your dad earlier. You were perfect.”

"I-I can't believe Sir Reiji just praised me!" Elaine held both hands against her cheeks and squirmed, shocked and joyful.

"Can I count on you to handle that?"

"Of course! Oh, gosh, Sir Reiji's counting on me for something!"

After Elaine talks to him, any adventurer who sees this Lars guy using a tent will be all like, "What's that?!" Hopefully, at least. "Good luck, Elaine."

"I won't need luck!" Elaine's expression was filled with purpose.

One day, about two weeks after I lent Elaine a tent to show Lars, I heard a heavy vehicle coming from afar.

Ka-thump! Ka-thump! Ka-thump!

The carriage stirred up dust as it headed toward the drugstore. It stopped right out front, and a familiar butler emerged, taking Elaine's hand as she stepped out of the vehicle.

She's pale, like she saw a ghost. Is she okay?

"I feel ill," Elaine mumbled. "I know I said to hurry, but the carriage rocked so much..."

"Drills here!" Noela exclaimed.

Elaine usually greeted us with enthusiasm, brushing back her drill-shaped curls dramatically. Today, however, she was totally out of it. "I've arrived, Noela."

Mina brought a chair. Elaine sat down, then slumped forward onto the counter.

"Sorry, Mina, but could you get her some water?"

"Of course. One moment."

Elaine's butler, Rayne, furrowed his brow apologetically. "I'm sorry for all the trouble my lady's causing you."

"No, no, it's totally fine." I smiled, waving him off.

Elaine sipped the water Mina brought her. After resting a bit, she seemingly regained her usual demeanor.

“Is this about the tents?” I asked her directly.

“Indeed. I gave Lord Lars the tent, and he used it. Then...”

Elaine looked at Rayne and nodded. He headed out to the carriage and then carried a bag into the drugstore, setting it on the counter.

“What’s that?” I asked. Mina and Noela looked curious as well.

“A bag of letters. I checked them, and they’re about the tents,” Elaine replied. “Look how many we received!”

Rayne turned the bag over. An absurd number of letters poured onto the counter. *Wait. Are those seriously all inquiries about our tents?*

Mina and Noela looked on with wide eyes.

“Groo! So many?!”

“Goodness! That’s certainly quite a few.”

Even I was surprised, to be honest. “Just how many are there?”

“I counted a hundred, then stopped there,” Elaine replied.

In other words, it was too much hassle to keep counting them. “Sir Lars’s sway is really something.”

Elaine shook her head, not agreeing completely. “He’s certainly influential. He’s a high-ranking adventurer, after all. That said, according to Lars himself, what sparked interest was your name—the name of the new potions’ inventor—being attached to the tents. Lots of adventurers are familiar with those new potions of yours.”

Wow. I’d barely been out of Kalta. I had no idea the potions were so widely popular.

“You and Lord Lars’s celebrity worked together, and a ton of adventurers asked him how he got his tent. He directed them to my residence.” That was why all the adventurers sent their letters to Elaine.

“Hunch tent sell fast, Master,” Noela predicted.

“You might be right, fluffball.” That meant, going forward, I’d need to produce a hell of a lot more water repellent and protective coating.

“Things are going to get busy, Mr. Reiji,” said Mina.

“Yeah.”

“Oh! I forgot to ask something important,” Elaine added. “How much do you plan to sell the tents for?”

Right. I totally forgot to mention that. Well, considering the material and labor costs, as well as other expenses... “A-about 150,000...” Is that too much?

I looked up, concerned about Elaine’s response, and saw that her eyes had widened. “A-are you sure you can sell such a high-quality item for a mere 150,000 rin?!”

“That’s the price the business association settled on after running over the expenses.”

“All right,” she replied. “I’ll answer these letters accordingly.”

Most of the letters simply asked about preordering a tent for a reasonable price. They didn’t specify a date when they’d need one by or anything.

“I need to tell the business association members about these letters so we can make more tents,” I informed Elaine and immediately headed into town to do so.

Thus, the business association started crafting tents for adventurers who’d ordered them. We didn’t end up insanely busy, though—probably because the tents were expensive. We sold them for the exact price I’d told Elaine. In fact, we made a few more tents than we’d received orders for.

Water repellent and protective coating generally sold more slowly than some other drugstore products, like potions, so Kirio Drugs kept up as the business association produced the tents. I think, in the end, we made and sent off something like thirty of them. We sold them almost at cost, so we basically didn’t turn a profit.

When she heard the price of the tents after the fact, Paula was infuriated. “150,000 rin?! That’s *it*?! Are you out of your damn mind?! This is the worst!”

Neither I, nor the other business association members, had wanted to rip anyone off.

“When someone becomes an upper-level adventurer, they can afford to splurge a bit to camp outside safe and sound!” Paula railed. “*That’s* how we should promote these tents—as expensive specialty equipment! Adventurers would’ve bought them even if you charged a *million* rin!”

Now that was insane.

She might’ve been on to something, however. I didn’t know much about rankings, but I figured upper-echelon adventurers earned quite a bit of money—enough to make some noblemen blush. At the price Paula had suggested, though, only high rollers could’ve afforded a tent. Maybe that was what she wanted, but it was too greedy for my blood. Anyway, I was aiming for lots of people to be able to use Kalta’s specialty product.

If I was in it to make bank, I could’ve added another digit to the drugstore’s prices a long time ago. Hell, I could even have marked up the potions Noela drank daily.

Elaine came in, carrying a new bag of mail orders. “Look how many tent requests you got this month, Sir Reiji!”

Ever since the business association had started selling tents in earnest, Count Valgas had served as a kind of middleman.

“Ah! Thanks a lot. How many orders are we talking?”

“About thirty, I’d say.”

Honestly, thank goodness no one’s asked for their tent by a certain date. So far, we’d been able to produce them at a relaxed pace.

“Manufacturing the tents in the business association’s meeting hall was a good idea,” Elaine noted.

“That was Paula’s suggestion. She also proposed hiring jobseekers and people with nothing to do, then teaching them to make tent parts.” I’d actually been shocked to learn that the business association had already produced a guidebook on tentmaking.

“Kalta seems more abuzz than ever,” Elaine said. “It’s fantastic!”

I agreed completely. And the town’s exciting atmosphere came down to the fact that everyone was working and earning money, which made me kind of proud. I really wanted tents to become must-have equipment for adventurers everywhere.

That didn’t quite happen, though. The tent orders decreased month by month. The month before last, we’d received ten requests; last month, six; and this month, a paltry single order.

Elaine and I sat in a chamber of the meeting hall. “This is bizarre,” I complained. “How could people not want something so useful?”

Elaine shook her head, befuddled. “Isn’t a tent necessary to any adventurer? After all, they work outside!”

“Mm...all I can think is that maybe everyone who’d want one already bought one.”

Paula folded her arms and furrowed her brow. “That would make sense if the tents were overpriced, and the cost up front was so high that only a few people could get them.” That wasn’t the case, however. We specifically priced them lower so that more people could afford them. “Personally, I’ve got a certain suspicion,” she added.

“And that is?” Elaine and I asked in unison.

“I don’t have any evidence, so I won’t say it outright yet. But it’s what I’d do if I weren’t from Kalta.”

Huh?

Paula refused to explain further. “If I’m right, it’s gonna suck,” she added, her expression darkening. Her demeanor reminded me of some kind of detective.

“If no one wants a tent right now, it is what it is,” I concluded. We’d made the tents to order, so we didn’t have any backstock that we needed to sell. No one in the business association had lost their outlay costs or anything.

Then, however, the sound of a horse-drawn carriage’s wheels filled the air.

Lord Valgas entered the meeting hall. “Elaine! Are you in here?”

“What’s wrong, Father?”

“I received this along with a letter from Lord Lars.” Lord Valgas handed Elaine the letter and something resembling an unassembled tent.

“This isn’t one of our tents, is it?” Elaine asked hesitantly.

“Of course not.” Paula looked displeased.

Elaine read the letter. “That’s impossible,” she said to herself.

“What’d he say?”

“Lord Lars says adventurers are complaining that our tents fall apart. He sent us this one to check over.”

They’re angry about defective products? Considering how many tents we’d made, it wouldn’t be crazy if at least one or two fell short. That wasn’t a good thing, but...

“Lord Lars didn’t just receive a single complaint—he got tons. He says it’s been quite an issue for him.”

“Seriously?”

Paula had done quality control on the tents. I turned toward her and saw her inspecting the tent Lord Lars had sent, seemingly confirming something.

“I knew this’d happen,” Paula whispered angrily to herself. “I’d never send a customer something defective!”

“What do you mean...?” I asked hesitantly.

“Take a look!”

Paula handed me the tent frame. It was definitely bamboo, but there was no sign that the tentmaker had used protective coating. However skillfully an adventurer assembled the tent, it’d break at the drop of a hat.

“Look at this too.” She passed me the canopy.

I knew what Paula was saying. “No water repellent was applied to this either.”

“Exactly,” she sighed. “I guess this kind of thing’s bound to happen, no matter

what.”

Finally, I understood what she’d been implying before Lars’s letter arrived. “Someone’s making their own tents and selling them as products from Kalta, huh?”

“Darn right. And customers don’t realize they’re buying fakes, so they’re griping about false advertising.”

That kind of thing wasn’t rare in Japan. Whenever some big breakthrough product would hit the market, other companies rushed to release knockoffs—although they usually didn’t sell anything downright defective.

“This is completely unforgivable!” Elaine gasped. “How dare they look at your amazing idea and then make and sell this garbage?!”

“No kidding! And it’s hurting our sales. Tents *were* selling well and now they aren’t. We’re basically going to lose money we should be making!” Paula smacked the table.

Paula, friend, you really shouldn’t say that last part out loud.

After locking up the drugstore, I explained everything to my team.

“Fake tents?! No!” Noela grimaced.

“I can’t believe someone out there did such a thing,” Mina added unhappily.

“I’m more surprised that everyone wants a tent!” Vivi noted, sounding totally relaxed. She was right that counterfeits popping up meant that the Kalta tents themselves were pretty popular.

“Doctor, let’s find the culprit and make them regret acting so foolishly for the rest of eternity!” Ejil cried. “If you allow me, I can make it happen with ease!”

It didn’t take him long to get real dark. “I don’t want to penalize anyone,” I replied.

Technology was always evolving. We just so happened to “invent” tents because they hadn’t already existed in this world, but someone else could’ve beaten us to it. Still, Paula was right that these knockoffs of our product were

negatively affecting our reputation, and I felt bad that Lars had to deal with the adventurers' complaints.

"From now on, there will probably be knockoff tents," I admitted.

"Steal Master's idea!" Noela was enraged, and her tail stood straight up in anger.

"I know it's a shame that people are stealing our idea. But I think it's okay for us not to punish the counterfeiters. Even if we did, other people would keep trying to copy us. All in all, it's fine, I think."

"Groo..." Noela didn't seem to agree, but that wasn't crucial.

"Heh heh heh. So, it's my time at last! I shall find the counterfeiters, Doctor, and drop them into a hell beyond their wildest dreams! Hee hee hee! I'm elated!"

"I said *not* to! Were you even listening to me?!" I heaved an exasperated sigh. Ejil always went straight to violence.

"You're all right with counterfeiters making knockoff tents, Mr. Reiji?"

"Well, I'm not planning to make a fuss about tents being produced outside Kalta."

"You'll never take over the world with a weak stance like that, Doctor!"

"No worries. I don't intend to take over the world."

"Like tent!" Noela insisted. "Don't want people insulting!"

Yeah, I get that... I wasn't crazy about people trash-talking our hard work either. And the average tent buyer had no way of knowing whether the manufacturer had applied water repellent or not. *If only we could use a quality-approval symbol or something.*

"I've got it!" Vivi raised her hand excitedly. "Me! Pick me!"

"Yes. The fairy in the front row."

"I'm a *spirit*! Jeez!" After our usual back-and-forth, Vivi cleared her throat. "What if you signed the tents to show that they were made here in Kalta?!"

"Ah! That's a great suggestion."

“Groo! Not bad for Vivi!”

“Riiiiight? Tee hee hee! I knew it was awesome! Feel free to sing my praises!”
Vivi was delighted.

“If there’s no way to authenticate the signature, couldn’t people just copy it too?” Ejil pointed out.

The lake spirit’s bright expression darkened at his logic. “Why do you have to be like that? It was such a good idea!”

I’d already considered using a logo to signal that the tents were produced in Kalta. But this world didn’t have Japan’s super-detailed printing technology, and a counterfeiter could make as many knockoff tents as they wanted with a copied logo or signature. The buyer wouldn’t be able to tell the logos apart, so it wouldn’t matter if only we could tell.

I racked my brain. “Something like a signature that anyone can distinguish...”
Hmm...

Mina attempted to reassure me. “Mr. Reiji, you and the others created something wonderful. If Kalta keeps making tents, I think people will come to understand the difference.”

“Thanks. I really hope you’re right.”

Still, our primary customers were adventurers who risked their lives daily. If they used defective equipment, it could mean the difference between life and death. For instance, if the frame broke, the adventurer could end up drenched in cold rain.

We’d known that today’s tent was a knockoff because the counterfeiters hadn’t applied water repellent or protective coating—products I’d created using my medicine-making skill. And they couldn’t rip off my potions, because I made those with my skill too. In short, it would be easy to tell whether an item I usually produced with my medicine-making skill was counterfeit.

“Hm...? Oh...yeah,” I mumbled. “I should just make that more obvious.”

“Groo... Master?”

“I had an idea. I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll get dinner ready, then.” Mina headed to the kitchen.

“Groo! Me help Master.”

“I’ll help too!” Vivi exclaimed.

“No, you can go home for now, Vivi.” I nodded slightly. “Good work today.”

“Gah! You’re sending me home like I wasn’t pitching in on this?!”

“Noela will be more than enough help at this point.”

“Would you like me to help in the lab too, Doctor?” asked Ejil.

“I have a different request for you, actually.”

“Oh! Leave it to me.”

“Aw...you’re so lucky,” Vivi told him, a trace of jealousy in her voice.

I jotted down the ingredients my medicine-making skill deemed necessary, asking Ejil to grab the ones I didn’t already have. Then, feeling guilty, I invited Vivi to join us in the lab as we created my new product.

“I’m back, Doctor!” Ejil soon cried, opening the lab door. He’d apparently used teleportation magic; he was breathing heavily.

“That was fast. Thanks a lot, pal.”

“I-It was nothing,” he replied, trying to act cool.

I bet he thought about Noela the whole time.

“Here, Master.”

“Thanks.” *Not that she’s even looking his way.*

We had everything we needed, so I began the usual process.

Night Light: Gel that causes surfaces to glow slightly in the dark after application.

“Done!” I exclaimed.

On Earth, people used this kind of unique gel for things like clock hands and

watch dials. It was helpful when you woke up at night, since it let you tell the time without turning on the lights. The drugstore's single-use light source was similar, but its effect disappeared after a few hours. I hadn't designed that for long-term use.

"What this, Master?"

"If you spread it on something, it'll glow when it's dark."

"Ha ha ha! Don't be silly, Reiji!" Vivi cackled. "You can't produce light where there is none. You need fire for that!"

"Just watch," I replied, heading into the yard.

My surroundings were pitch-black; the light from the house was barely visible. Dipping my finger into the night light gel, I drew a few simple characters on Noela's brand-new tent.

"Groo?! Glows!"

"That's amazing!" Vivi cried. "It's so dark outside!"

"I see. Good idea, Doctor." It sounded like Ejil had caught on to my plan. "Once you mark the tents with that night light gel, all you'll need to do to prove their authenticity is go someplace dark. Even if a counterfeiter copies your signature or logo, it certainly won't glow in the dark, since nobody can counterfeit your drugstore products."

"You got it."

"Amazing, Master!"

"Sorry for laughing, Reiji. That really is incredible."

I explained to the rest of the business association that we could use night light gel to watermark the tents.

"Rei Rei, you're a literal god," Paula enthused.

I made more of the gel—not as a drugstore product but only for use on the business association's tents alongside water repellent and protective coating. Then I had Elaine tell Lars that knockoff tents were circulating but that our new tents couldn't be replicated completely, and that we'd offer a night light gel

treatment to customers who'd already purchased a Kalta tent.

Before long, the number of tent orders was back to normal.

"Sir Reiji, we got tons of requests this month!" Elaine cried, carrying in a bunch of letters.

Not all the letters were mail orders, though. Some were from adventurers expressing gratitude for such sturdy, portable shelters.

"I've got to make sure the others read these too," I murmured.

When I put the fan mail down in the meeting hall, the business association members leafed through it happily.

Chapter 10: Outdoor Goods

“HEY, PHARMACIST.” Annabelle dropped in to buy her usual round of beloved potions.

“Morning. You’re early today.” In fact, the drugstore wasn’t even fully open yet. We were just getting ready.

“Well, you’ve seemed busy durin’ the days lately,” she replied. “And I didn’t want to make more work for you, but...”

“What is it?”

“I...I want to make a tent order.”

She’s so quiet. “Can you afford it?”

“Of course I can!”

“Sorry. Didn’t mean to be rude. We’ll put one in, then. How many tents would you like?”

Annabelle was captain of the Red Cat Brigade, the mercenary squad protecting the town, so she might’ve planned to use the tents while training her men.

She raised her index finger. “One.”

“Will that be all...?” I asked hesitantly. *Wait... Is this tent for personal use? Maybe she wants a secret base like Noela’s? In that case, I shouldn’t pry.*

“Everyone wants one of those deep down, Annabelle. Don’t worry.”

“Huh? Uh...yeah, all right.”

Are we on the same page? I wondered. “Uh...what do you plan to use your tent for?”

“Well...nothin’ in particular. I guess I want one so I can take a load off,” Annabelle sighed. “Look, the Red Cat Brigade live in barracks, right? Wherever I go, the guys are always watchin’.”

Ah...I see. “You’d like a spot where you can be on your own?”

“Y-yeah, exactly! See, you totally get it, Pharmacist!” Annabelle seemed thrilled that someone understood her plight.

She wants to go camping solo, eh?

“What’re you grinnin’ about?” she asked bluntly.

“Nothing. I just totally understand where you’re coming from.”

“Really...? Well, I’ll take one tent, then. Oh, and keep this secret from my men. If they find out I’m goin’ campin’, they’ll want to tag along.”

“You got it.” We *were* a pharmacy after all, so I generally made sure not to talk about anything that infringed on customers’ privacy.

It was pretty mysterious that people seemed to want to try camping just because the business association was producing tents. Still, it was important to have personal space. I hadn’t really craved that since arriving in this world, but I thought maybe I should camp solo sometime. I couldn’t exactly get alone time at the drugstore, since Noela often kept an eye on me.

“What talk to Red about, Master?”

“Nothing much.”

“Garoo?”

As I opened the store, Mina told me she was going shopping in town. I asked her to put in an extra tent order.

“I just need to go to the meeting hall, right?” she asked.

“Uh-huh. As soon as you tell them, they’ll know what to do.”

“All right! See you later, then.”

Noela and I saw Mina off. Once we’d opened the store, things were quiet, so I headed to the lab. *If I go camping solo, there are definitely some things I’ll need... I can make those on the sly right now.*

“What make, Master?” Noela demanded, peeking in from the doorway.

“Whoa! You scared me. Didn’t I ask you to watch the store?”

“Groo! Help Master.” In other words, she wanted to pitch in because she was

bored.

“I was thinking of making potions,” I told her.

“Noela go back! Would only distract you.” Tail wagging, she hurried to her post.

“Thank goodness she’s so easy to handle.” Grinning, I returned to my work.

I already had a tent. Next, I needed tools to start a fire. *I want to light one the traditional way!*

I’d never gone out of my way to formulate something that would make more work for me. Running a little magic through a fire stone allowed you to start a fire immediately, so those were super useful day to day. Still, going into the wild and getting by with limited tools was part of what made camping so much fun. Sure, I could’ve brought stones or Hell Flame, but I wanted to enjoy the discomfort, if that made sense.

Kindling Gel: Solidifies when applied. Rubbing two treated surfaces together firmly produces sparks.

Perfect. “If I put this on sticks or something...” I could kindle a fire easily.

I carried my new creation into the yard, found two branches, and applied the gel to them right away. As I did so, the gelled sections turned lead gray, instantly becoming as hard as metal.

This should work. I tentatively rubbed the branches together.

Pa-shoom! Sparks burst from the gelled spots. For a second, the sticks resembled firecrackers.

“Whoa!” I exclaimed. Extinguishing the branches, I retried the process several times, careful not to set anything else alight. “The gel doesn’t seem to wear out. Don’t tell me it works forever once you’ve applied it...?”

Was it possible I’d created a substitute for fire life stones? Mina said she replaced those twice a month. If a life stone died while she was cooking or

something, and she didn't have an extra, something like this would be a lifesaver.

Looks like I accidentally made a really handy product. Still, we'd never need the kindling gel if we didn't run out of fire life stones.

"What wrong, Red?"

"Hey, is the pharmacist here?"

"Master make potions. No get in way!"

"I ain't plannin' to, dum-dum."

Overhearing the conversation in the drugstore, I headed back and found Noela blocking Annabelle's path. "Noela, it's fine. No need to stop her. What's up, Annabelle?"

"Tasty taste done, Master?!" Noela demanded.

Oh, right. Whoops. "Uh...those potions will take a little longer."

"Groo... Understand. Patient."

Sorry, Noela. I'll make you a potion as soon as I'm done here. "Um, Annabelle, did you forget something?"

The mercenaries' captain shook her head, her ponytail swaying. "Is my tent ready?"

"Unfortunately, those take a while to finish after they're ordered."

"O-oh...really?" she seemed disappointed.

"Mina just took your request to the business association, though. Ah—she's home now."

Mina carried a basket of groceries into the drugstore. *Speak of the devil. Wait a sec... Those poles poking out of her basket look awfully familiar.*

"How'd dropping off that tent order go, Mina?" I asked.

"Um, about that... An adventurer canceled their order, and the business association gave me their tent." So, the rods in her basket were actually tentpole sections. Mina pulled a canopy from her bag as well, smiling. "Isn't

that wonderful?”

Annabelle jumped into the conversation immediately, looking amazed. “Th-that’s a Kalta tent?!”

Mina hesitated.

“Groo?”

Since the girls seemed confused, I explained this morning’s visit. “Annabelle ordered her own tent earlier.”

Noela, our first tent tester, proudly held her head high and nodded dramatically. “Red! Red! Tents very good indeed!”

“You’ve used one already?”

“Noela first to use!”

“Really?!”

Annabelle had the money for the tent with her. She passed it to me, and I’d take it to the meeting hall later. When Mina handed her the tent, she seemed stunned. “This is it... A tent! It’s so light. Amazin’!”

I won’t lie, seeing someone react to a Kalta tent firsthand is pretty thrilling. It felt even better that I hadn’t created the tent solo. The entire business association’s efforts had produced it.

“It’s pretty easy to put together,” I assured Annabelle.

“Got it. If it’s simple, I’m sure I’ll have no problem. Really appreciate this, Pharmacist.”

Before she could leave, I called, “Um, hold on a sec!”

Rushing back to the lab, I grabbed some of the kindling gel I’d just made and then returned to the drugstore. I handed Annabelle the container. “You can use this to start fires without life stones. Give it a try if you want.”

“Th-thanks. When’d you have time to make me somethin’ like this...?”

“Don’t mention it. I actually made this earlier. If you go camping anytime soon, let me know how it works out.”

Annabelle nodded, leaving the drugstore with her tent and kindling gel in hand.

“Do you think the Red Cat Brigade’s going on an excursion?” Mina asked, cocking her head.

“Apparently, Annabelle wants to use that tent by herself.”

“By herself?” Mina looked even more befuddled.

“Master! Hurry! Tasty taste!”

Noela was impatient to drink her potion, so I headed back to the lab.

Chapter 11:

A Dubious Heart-to-Heart

AFTER HARVESTING SOME medicinal herbs from our meadow, I sat down in the shade.

What nice weather today. Perfect for this kind of work.

Ejil and Mina were watching the drugstore, and they were pretty much a dream team. I figured I could rest a bit before heading back.

“Master, here.” Noela presented me with a drink. “Smooth water. Try.”

“You used purifier on this, huh? Thanks.” The water was kind of lukewarm since we brought it from home, but it more than quenched my thirst.

Noela sprawled on the ground, looking comfy. Suddenly, her ears twitched. “Groo?”

“What’s the matter?”

“Loud voice.”

She hears someone talking? However hard I focused, I couldn’t hear a thing.

“Over there!” She stood and dashed off. I followed.

Just as Noela said, Annabelle was nearby, arguing with her second-in-command, Doz, and a few other mercenaries.

“You gotta stop, Boss!”

“Shut yer mouth!” Annabelle snapped. “When I’ve got a day off, I’m free to go wherever I want!”

“Sure, but you can’t take all this and—”

“Ah! Reiji, bro!” Doz noticed me.

The other mercenaries greeted me too. “You gotta listen to this, Reiji,” said one. “The boss is...”

“The pharmacist don’t need to know every little damn thing!” Annabelle sounded as prickly as a rebellious young girl. She was carrying a bunch of things,

seemingly headed somewhere.

“You’re tryin’ to run away, ain’t you, Boss?!” Doz accused. The other mercenaries nodded.

“Wh-wha—?! Like hell I am!” She landed a kick on Doz.

Annabelle’s the type of boss everyone would’ve hated back in Japan.

“Heh heh heh...” her second-in-command snickered.

But Doz seems plenty happy...so I guess it’s all right?

“You’re so lucky, Doz, man!”

“Boss, if you’re runnin’ away, you gotta plant a kick on all our butts first!”

Yeah, I totally get why she’d want to leave town.

“How many times I gotta tell you jackasses that I ain’t runnin’ away!” Annabelle sighed.

The bag on her back was full. When I inspected it more closely, I saw tentpoles poking out. “Ah,” I said. “You’re going camping?”

“Yeah,” Annabelle glowered. “I wanted some alone time, but these dummies are makin’ a fuss about it. At this rate, I ain’t gonna get any chance to relax.”

I could see why she wanted solitude; she was literally surrounded by her men at all hours. Even at the barracks, guys came and went as their shifts started and ended.

Doz shook his head. “You could never camp solo, Boss.”

“I ain’t gonna know unless I try!”

“We already know! You can’t even cook. I can picture you comin’ home early with an empty stomach!”

The other men nodded. Annabelle didn’t respond, probably because she could picture that herself.

Doz turned to me. “Reiji, pal, if you got time, could you go with the boss?”

“H-hey, what do you... Th-that’s way too much to ask!” Annabelle protested.

“Red’s face red too!” Noela pointed out.

“We’d feel fine lettin’ her go if you went along,” Doz continued.

“I-I ain’t ready for somethin’ like that, damn it!” Annabelle insisted. “I-It’s too outta the blue!”

“Griping...but doesn’t mind!” Noela noted.

“Please, Medicine God. I know it’s a lot to ask, but would you look after her for us?”

“I told you, I don’t... I, er...” Annabelle kept glancing at me as she tried to interrupt Doz.

“No problem,” I told them. “The drugstore’s open today, but it doesn’t look like we’ll be too busy.” I already finished making some products, so I didn’t need to worry about stock running low.

“Y-you sure?” Annabelle asked. She fidgeted, clearly lacking self-assurance. “I’ll probably be real clumsy puttin’ up that tent.”

Her men watched approvingly.

“The boss is usually so confident.”

“This is adorable.”

“Cute. She’s all sheepish.”

“Yeah, seriously, it’s all good,” I assured her. “I’m not sure how useful I’ll be, either, but we can team up.”

Once I’d agreed, Doz grinned. “I feel more than safe leavin’ the boss with you, pal.”

“Take care of her, please!” another mercenary requested.

“I’m sure we’ll help each other out,” I replied. And, just like that, I’d agreed to go camping with Annabelle.

Annabelle and I walked about thirty minutes, leaving Doz, the mercenaries, and Noela far behind. We found ourselves at a small lake.

“How’s here look for campin’?”

“Seems good to me.”

Back in the meadow, Noela had complained that she hadn’t had her daily potion yet. She’d headed home to the drugstore with a maniacal expression, and I’d asked her to take the herbs we’d picked.

“Um, so, what’s the first step?” Annabelle asked.

“You should set up the tent.”

“R-right.”

She fished through her bag, pulling out the tent she recently purchased, and started to piece it together uncertainly. She asked me not to give her advice unless she struggled, so instead of explaining how to assemble it, I just answered her questions.

As she got closer and closer to completing the tent, Annabelle whispered to herself. “This goes...uh, like that? And then...”

“Annabelle, are you sure you’re okay with me tagging along like this?” I was concerned, since the point of this whole camping trip had been for her to get alone time.

“Huh? Er...y-yeah, of course,” she replied incredibly quietly, circling behind the tent as if trying to escape my gaze.

I guess she’s fine with me being here.

Still hidden behind the tent, Annabelle finished assembling it. She cocked her head at me. “Is it...done?”

I looked quickly and gave her a thumbs-up. “All good!”

“Amazin’! It was so easy to put together. And light too!”

“We first made these tents for adventurers, so we really focused on those two things. I can promise your tent will hold up in the rain too.”

“Good stuff,” Annabelle said, looking wholly satisfied. She rummaged through her bag again, pulling out the kindling gel I recently gave her. “This can start a fire, huh?”

She was mostly talking to herself, so I just nodded mentally. “I’ll help you find

some firewood,” I offered.

“Thanks a lot.”

Silently, the two of us gathered anything flammable we could find. There were dry twigs and stuff near the lake; I grabbed some and headed back to the tent. Annabelle had picked up dead weeds as well, so we probably wouldn’t have trouble starting a fire.

Annabelle used the kindling gel correctly, rubbing together the stick sections that changed color. Sparks flew onto the dead weeds, and white smoke rose. She blew gently on it; being a mercenary, she was well trained when it came to this kind of task. Soon, a tiny flame flickered from the weeds.

“I can’t believe how fast that went—without even usin’ magic.” Surprised, she looked at the sticks she’d used to kindle the fire.

“Life stones require a little magic, you know,” she added. “Folks who don’t need to fight day to day are probably fine usin’ ’em. But folks who *do* fight, like us mercenaries, we wanna avoid wastin’ magic. This kindlin’ gel stuff’s great that way. I’m sure an adventurer spendin’ a long time on some journey would appreciate it too.”

Huh. I’d never really looked at the kindling gel from that perspective, so it was a refreshing take.

I snapped some twigs in half, tossing them into the small fire. “Doz was worried about you camping alone, but I don’t see why.”

“Hey, I ain’t a kid! I can at least go campin’. They’re just overly protective.” With a pained grin, Annabelle sipped a potion she’d brought.

I rolled a nearby log toward the fire. Sitting down on it, I patted the area beside me. “Come have a seat, Annabelle. I know it’ll be a little crowded, but...”

She shook her head. “I-I’m all right over here.”

“You sure?” Annabelle was sitting cross-legged, and I could tell her legs were starting to ache. *But if she says she’s fine, she must be fine.*

I noticed that the mercenary captain had left her bag open. *There’s something big and brown in there. Hmm...* I stared, curious, until I finally figured out what it

was. *Two big, brown round ears... I could be wrong, but is that a teddy bear?*

Annabelle stared wistfully into the flames. "Sittin' here on the ground, lookin' into the fire, reminds me of my days as a wanderer."

Seems like she's gonna start talking about her past...but I'm so curious about that teddy bear.

"Before Lord Valgas hired us as security, the Red Cat Brigade went all over, protectin' different towns from bandits and the like." She tossed another stick into the fire.

She's reminiscing about the past with a somber expression, yet she brought a stuffed animal along.

"Back then, we were constantly stavin' off hunger with water, and sleepin' outside was the norm. We hardly ever bathed properly. Just gettin' an occasional dip was more than enough."

Then the one thing she definitely didn't need was a camping trip! She's lived such a wild life, yet she's got that teddy bear with her, I mused. Why? Is she lonely? You know...maybe she's someone who wants solitude but actually hates being alone?

Annabelle sipped her potion—although, given the atmosphere, some whiskey would've been perfect.

"Did you know Lord Valgas already when he offered the Red Cat Brigade the job?" I asked.

"Nah. We just happened to be in town. When Lord Valgas heard, he reached out to us. An' there were times I wondered why we took this job. Workin' in Kalta paid practically nothin', compared to how much the Red Cat Brigade used to earn."

Yet she and her men were still protecting the town.

Actually, how old is Annabelle? Doz and her men call her "Boss," but that doesn't necessarily mean anything in terms of age. Could she be over thirty...?

Annabelle paused, glaring at me. "What's on your mind, pal?"

"N-nothing."

“Anyhow, the Red Cat Brigade wound up stickin’ around. The pay’s crap, but Kalta’s a nice place.”

“I totally hear you.” Everyone in town was kind. Kalta lacked a lot of things, and it was hardly bustling, but for some odd reason that didn’t bother me.

“The men don’t seem to have an issue with it,” Annabelle added.

“As long as you aren’t guzzling down the potions, right?” In exchange for spreading the word about my prototype products, Annabelle received complimentary potions from the drugstore every day.

“Don’t bring *that* up now.” She changed the subject. “Hey, Pharmacist...how’d *you* end up here? If you don’t want to talk about it, uh, you don’t have to.”

She clearly didn’t want to push too hard. We’d have never discussed this stuff back at the drugstore, but when you were sitting in front of a campfire and had nothing to do, you wound up talking about things like this.

“I don’t mind,” I replied, then quickly thought about how to answer.

There was no way Annabelle would believe that I’d teleported here and received a medicine-making skill. So, I kept that bit secret while I described my fateful encounter with Noela. Annabelle interjected now and then as she listened.

“So, you’ve never been to the royal capital, Lindog?”

“Nope.” I’d honestly traveled very little outside Kalta.

“You should check it out sometime. You might learn from the medicine for sale there. Hell, in your position, I’d sell my products to stupid nobles in the capital for an arm and a leg,” she told me, giggling. “You could be out doin’ stuff like that, but instead, you’re here in Kalta makin’ products to help people. You’re sure a curious fella. I respect that.”

“I haven’t done anything praiseworthy,” I replied. Honestly, being complimented directly like this was kind of embarrassing.

The royal capital, eh? I’d like to go someday. Back in Japan, I hadn’t been on many trips, so there were plenty of countries and cities I’d never visited.

“Normally, this is kind of hard to ask someone, so I’m gonna ask it now,”

Annabelle began.

“Yeah, sure. What is it?”

“A-any plans to get hitched someday?”

“Huh?” The question was so unexpected that I had no idea how to respond.

Is this the magic of camping? Annabelle and I had discussed stuff we’d never typically have chatted about, like our pasts. Now, we were even dipping into our private lives. Earlier in the conversation, she said I wouldn’t have to talk about anything hard, but...

“I-I don’t have a partner.”

“Really? I figured you’d have your pick.”

“No, no, no!” I cried. *What’s she talking about?!*

“You’re pullin’ my leg.”

“What about you, Annabelle? Nobody special in your life?” I shot the question back.

“Nuh-uh.”

That was fast as hell. “I think you’d make a wonderful wife,” I told her. She was thoughtful and caring, as well as tough, thanks to her time as a mercenary.

“Wha—?!” Annabelle turned bright red in embarrassment. “I-I’m gonna punch you!”

“Why?! I complimented you!”

“Shut up.” She poked the ground with a flaming stick. “You think way too highly of me. I’m so bad at cooking, the guys worry about me!”

“You could just learn to cook. Nobody’s good at that stuff from the get-go.”

“Th-they aren’t?”

I shook my head.

Just as the sun began to set, Noela sprinted toward us in her wolf form, carrying a bag on her back. She’d probably followed my scent.

“Groo!” As she reached Annabelle and me, she slipped into human form.

“Mealtime, Master!”

“You came to tell me? Thanks.” I stroked her head gently.

“Mina cook. Look delicious.”

“Now that’s exciting.”

“Here, Red.” Noela pulled out some kind of meat dish wrapped in a crust of bread and bamboo leaves. “Eat. From Mina.”

“Jeez. Looks like I owe her one.” It didn’t seem like Annabelle had a plan for food while camping, and she graciously accepted the meal.

Doz and the others had wanted me to look out for her, but at that point, I decided she’d be fine on her own. “On that note, I’ll be going, Annabelle.”

“Sure. I appreciate your help.”

“My pleasure.” *She’s got her teddy bear, so she won’t be lonely.*

Noela waved. “Bye, Red!”

“See ya later.” I nodded to Annabelle again, walking away, and heard her whisper to herself behind me. “He’s never gettin’ married. He’s basically already...”

“I’m hungry. Let’s book it, Noela.”

“Groo! Leave to Noela!” She switched into her wolf form.

I hopped on her back, and we raced across the fields as dusk set over Kalta.

Chapter 12:

Drink & Ride

JUST AS I STEPPED OUT of the drugstore, I heard a voice inside. “Pardon me! I’ve arrived!”

“Oh, it’s just you, Elaine. Welcome.”

The young aristocrat confidently brushed her large, drill-like curls off her shoulders, waiting for me to get her a chair.

“There’s one right there, isn’t there?” I pointed out a chair nearby. Paula and Annabelle pulled it to the counter themselves whenever they dropped by to hang out.

I’m not hauling that chair over, I decided. Elaine might not be here for anything in particular.

“Noela’s out today,” I told her. Noela was off playing at Vivi’s place—in other words, at the lake.

“I’m here to speak to you, Sir Reiji,” Elaine informed me.

“Huh? Me? Are you out shopping?”

“The truth is, I have trouble traveling long distances by carriage.”

“Does it hurt your butt?”

“That’s part of the issue, but... Well, I also start feeling sick.” I could tell that was hard for Elaine to admit. “By the time I arrive at my destination, I’m dizzy, and certainly in no condition to attend a banquet.”

Elaine’s carriage had rushed to the drugstore not long ago, and now that I thought about it, she actually had complained that she felt sick as she disembarked. “I remember you were in bad shape last time.”

“Right... If a road’s nice and flat, it’s not too bad. Depending where I’m going, though, roads can be terribly bumpy, which makes the carriage jump. When that happens... Well...” Elaine grimaced as if just imagining that scenario made

her ill. “Once, Noela let me fly on Griffy. Before I could even think to be scared, I wound up getting sick, which worried them both.”

Does she feel sick on any mode of transportation? “Are boats the same?”

“They’re the absolute worst!” Elaine stressed.

She must’ve had a really bad experience.

“I’m going to San Logro next week. The lord over there is holding a party to celebrate completing a massive vessel.”

From what she’s said up until now, I can see where this is going. “Don’t tell me the event’s on the ship?”

“Yes...” She looked into the distance. I could imagine that a shipboard party sounded like hell to her. “I don’t want to go to San Logro, Sir Reiji...but that lord’s been very kind to my father and mother. According to them, I can’t afford not to attend.”

I figured. It doesn’t sound like there’s any way around it, I reflected. Personally, I’d just fake being sick or something. Relationships between nobles sound like a real pain in the rear.

“Okay, I get it,” I told her. “So, I just need to make a motion-sickness product, right?”

“No, that’s not it at all!” Elaine quivered with rage. “Have you even been listening to me?”

Wait... I was wrong?

She fidgeted, glancing at me. “S-Sir Reiji, I’d like you to accompany me.”

“Sorry, but I’ve got to work. You can go have fun on your own.”

“Such a dispassionate rejection!” The young woman looked shocked. “And when exactly were you planning on presenting me with a chair to sit in? I’ve been standing this whole time!”

“If you’d like to sit, there’s a chair right there.” Elaine frowned grumpily at me, refusing to move. With no other choice, I pulled out the chair for her. “Here, milady.”

“Ahem! Thank you very kindly.” Satisfied, she finally sat down.

“If you only came to invite me to that party, I assume you’re ready to go.”

“No, I have something else to discuss. If you refuse to accompany me, I’d like you to make a product to prevent me from feeling ill.”

So, it *did* come back to that. “You’d still get sick if I went with you, you know.”
I don’t have any effect on people’s health.

“If you were with me, Sir Reiji...I-I wouldn’t be able to get sick.”

Really? I found myself doubting that. “At any rate, let me whip something up. Just wait a few minutes.”

“All right.”

Leaving Elaine in the store, I entered my lab. I’d never been prone to motion sickness, but I figured it must feel awful. And in this particular case—motion sickness from riding in a horse-drawn carriage—it would really stink. Same with seasickness at a party on a huge boat. I absolutely understood why that whole event was one Elaine would dread.

“Guess I’ll put some effort into this product for the little lady,” I said to myself.

In this world, commoners never found themselves on boats, so I could see why I’d never gotten any requests for this kind of treatment. Selecting some ingredients from my stock, I followed the instructions my medicine-making skill laid out for me.

Drink & Ride: Enhances nerve functionality and anesthetizes gastric mucosa, controlling nausea.

That name’s sure self-explanatory.

Grinning, I took the bottled motion-sickness medicine into the drugstore.
“Here you go, Elaine.”

“Done already? You’re always so quick.”

The fact that my medicine-making skill could work so rapidly and lay out instructions really did rule. “Drink this before riding in your carriage or boarding the boat.”

“All right.”

“Why not test it by flying on Griffy?”

“C-certainly.”

Elaine and I headed to the stable, and I brought the griffin outside. “Can you fly for me, Griffy? I want to see whether Elaine gets motion sick.”

“Kyu!” Griffy nodded.

“I-I don’t want to go alone,” Elaine told me. “Please come with me, Sir Reiji!”

“I mean...okay, I guess.”

Once I agreed to accompany her, Elaine downed the Drink & Ride. I got on Griffy first, then took Elaine’s hand and sat her behind me.

“Wh-what should I hold on to, Sir Reiji?”

“How about my shirt hem?”

Elaine turned me down instantaneously. “How unromantic!”

Unromantic? What’s that even mean?

In the end, she grabbed my hips.

“You ready?” I asked.

“Yes.”

I gently squeezed Griffy’s sides with my heels. The griffin spread its wings wide and flapped them, running forward. Eventually, it rose into the air.

“Eeeeeek!” Elaine gripped me tightly, screaming like a junior high schooler on a roller coaster. “This is terrifying!”

Wait. Didn’t she say she wasn’t scared when she rode Griffy before, because she got so sick? That means the Drink & Ride’s working. “How’re you feeling, Elaine?”

“I can’t believe how brazenly I’m holding on to you! My heart’s racing!”

“That wasn’t what I was asking...” I wanted to know whether she felt sick.
“Griffy? Could you barrel roll, then fly up and down?”

“Kyu!” I took that as an affirmative, since Griffy proceeded to do as I’d requested.

“It’s not bothering me at all!” Elaine exclaimed. “Just the feeling of taking off made me sick last time!”

“Glad it’s working!”

Shortly after, Griffy landed, and I helped Elaine down.

“Thanks, Griffy.” I patted the creature’s head lovingly.

I’d only given Elaine my hand to help her off the griffin, but she kept holding it afterward. “With Noela gone, this is my chance,” she told me, adding dejectedly, “Any time I try to make a move on you, she’s livid!”

“I think it’s about time you let g—”

“I refuse!”

Why?

“Garrrooooo!”

Hearing a beast-like howl, I turned to see Vivi riding astride Noela’s wolf form. “G-gah! Noela, if you run this fast, I’ll fa—byaaah!” Just like that, she tumbled off.

“Groooo! Grrroaaar!”

“Sh-she’s here!” Elaine sprinted around me as Noela chased her, enraged.

“Noela, don’t,” I interjected.

She stopped in her tracks, returning to her human form. “Master no buddy-buddy with Drills!” she warned, making a big “X” with her arms crossed in front of her.

“What’s wrong with just helping her a bit?!”

“No! Master *Noela*’s master,” she said defiantly.

“Y-you can’t keep him trapped forever!” Elaine objected, and the two started

bickering.

Could we just take a sec to check on Vivi, please?

“I’ll take my leave for today, Sir Reiji,” Elaine announced. “And I’ll gladly make use of this medicine. Goodbye!” She departed via carriage.

“Can’t drop guard with Drills.” Noela shook her head.

A few days later, I get word from Elaine that the Drink & Ride worked perfectly; she hadn’t needed to worry about motion sickness at all during the shipboard celebration. Other nobles, seeing that she’d conquered her seasickness, had even told her that they had the same problem. Apparently, lots of aristocrats got motion sick.

Upon learning that, I wound up making more Drink & Ride, turning it into a product specifically for nobility.

Chapter 13:

A First-Time Swimming Trip

OVER DINNER, Noela excitedly explained how she'd enjoyed herself at Vivi's lake. "Went to swim!"

"Cool," I replied. "Man, you're pretty athletic, huh?"

"Groo! Compliment!"

She'd apparently swam a lot with Vivi. Since Noela was a werewolf, I figured she might've been instinctively able to swim without learning from anyone. After all, she also picked up archery pretty easily.

Mina seemed concerned. "I know Vivi was with you, Noela, but you need to be careful not to drown."

"Won't drown."

"Really?"

"Groo!" she nodded confidently.

"If you did, it'd be absolutely awful."

Why is Mina assuming that's going to happen? "Er, since Noela can swim, I don't see that being an issue," I interjected.

Mina just cocked her head at me. "People can't swim like animals or fish, Mr. Reiji," she said, as if it were the most obvious thing imaginable.

"Er...wait. Can *you* swim, Mina?"

"Of course not." She looked befuddled by the question.

Did I ask something strange? I'd learned to swim in school, but without those classes, I never would've been able to.

"Ah, I get it now," I mumbled. In this world, I figured people just didn't learn to swim. Maybe that wasn't the case if they grew up near a body of water, or they were a fisherman. But no one else would likely need to swim, so why would they learn? Heck, *I* barely remembered the last time I'd gone swimming.

“You can’t swim either, can you?” Mina asked me.

“Yeah, I totally can.”

“My goodness! How astounding!”

Why?! Oh...right. In Mina’s mind, people who weren’t born near water wouldn’t know how to.

“I didn’t know you were a man of the sea!” she added.

“I’m not, really. But, Mina, what would you do if you accidentally fell in a river or something?”

“Drown.”

She said it so matter-of-factly. *Wouldn’t you try struggling a little?!*

“Most people would drown,” she added.

“Mina drowning, Noela save!”

“Thank you, Noela!” Mina hugged her tightly.

“I’d save you too,” I assured her. “Wouldn’t it be best to learn how to swim yourself, though?”

“Mr. Reiji, do you plan for me to fall in a river or ocean anytime soon?” Mina asked, as if I intended to pull some practical joke on her.

“No! Not at all. But if nobody else was around, you’d die.”

“I’m *already* dead.”

“Oh—right.” *In that sense, Mina’s kind of invincible. So, I guess she doesn’t need to learn to swim. It’s not like I ever saved myself by swimming away from danger or anything either...*

Plus, if Mina were ever drowning in front of Noela or me, I knew we’d dive in after her— regardless of whether she was “already dead.”

“Do you think anyone in Kalta can swim?” I asked. “You know...Annabelle, or Paula, or Elaine?”

“Annabelle’s a mercenary, so I couldn’t say for sure. I doubt Paula or Elaine know how.”

Yup, I guess most folks are non-swimmers. Since Vivi was a lake spirit, I figured she probably only made friends with people who could swim, but I didn't know. I had no idea what her background actually was.

"I'm telling you, Mina, you should learn."

"You really think so?" Mina seemed dubious.

What're the upsides of being able to swim? There's got to be something enticing...

"Swam all around lake," Noela interjected. "Very tired."

Ah, there we go! "Mina?"

"Yes?"

"Did you know you have to use your limbs a ton to swim? It's a full-body exercise."

"Er..."

"If you're dieting, it's perfect."

Mina fell silent, putting down her spoon. I waited for her response, and she shot me a serious look. "It's time for me to learn to swim."

I planned to teach her the old-fashioned way, but according to my medicine-making skill, we could take a quicker path. "Looks like I can create a product to help you learn."

"Huh? Really?!"

"Yeah. I'll make it when I get a chance."

"All right, then. I'm relying on you!" the calorie counter told me politely.

Mina, Noela, and I rode Griffy to Vivi's lake, landing right in the woods. Mina held a bottle of the brand-new product I'd made; her face was uncertain.

Swimmerly: Contains ingredients that simulate an aquatic animal's instincts. Consumption grants basic swimming skills.

“I’ll really be able to swim if I drink this?” Mina inquired.

“That’s the idea. I could test it first, but I’m not sure how useful that’d be, since I can already swim.” The same went for Noela.

“Garoorroooo!”

Noela was wearing her bathing suit underneath her clothes. She quickly undressed, then dipped her hands in the lake and splashed herself with water.

“I was betting you’d just dive in, Noela.” I was surprised; I’d pictured her splashing all over.

Noela wagged her index finger at me. “That no good, Master.”

Would it freak out the fish or something?

“Scare body. Tighten heart!”

Seems like Noela’s pretty cautious when it comes to swimming.

Vivi poked her head from beneath the water’s surface. “Welcome, everyone! I was really, really looking forward to you all visiting today!”

“We’re just here to swim,” I warned her, “not fool around.”

“Why do you always have to be such a party pooper?” she cried.

All right, enough teasing Vivi.

“I’m ready, Mr. Reiji.” Mina stepped from the shadows, wearing her swimsuit.

“Mina, you’ve got such a fair complexion! It’s pretty near to mine,” Vivi noted. I did my best not to look.

“Bottoms up!” Mina downed the Swimmerly medicine. “So, this’ll help me lose weight, Mr. Reiji?”

“No, not quite. *Swimming* will.” Drinking that new product wouldn’t make Mina lighter. *Man, she always tries to take the easy way out.*

Mina started stretching. “It would’ve been tricky to have anyone besides me test this ‘Swimmerly’ stuff, wouldn’t it?”



I decided not to ask why.

“How come?” Vivi inquired instead.

“Well, most people would drown if the new product didn’t work. I’d be fine, though!”

“Why would you be fine?” The lake spirit seemed confused.

“Don’t ask,” I interjected.

“I mean, I’ll be all right if I drown, since I’m already dead.” Mina cheerfully gave the explanation I’d expected.

Vivi’s face was blank. “Huh?”

Oh...she didn’t know?

“Er...what?” she continued. “What do you mean, ‘dead’?!”

“Now, Vivi, don’t get worked up about my personal details,” Mina said placidly.

“You call being dead a detail?!”

Noela swam toward Vivi and patted her on the shoulder. “Just a detail.”

A lot of people would’ve considered it a big deal that Mina was dead. To most of the staff, though, it didn’t mean much. *There’s a ghost, a demon king, and even a lake spirit working at Kirio Drugs, aren’t there? On top of that, instead of a cat or a dog, we’ve got a pet griffin.*

Noela’s comment was the last straw, however. A nail in the proverbial coffin. Looking as if she’d seen a ghost (ha), Vivi sank into the lake water.

“That *is* why I’m so pale, Vivi,” Mina pointed out. Vivi didn’t respond.

Just pretending this was all a dream, huh?

“Time to get in, I suppose,” said Mina. At first, she only immersed her feet in the lake, but soon she slid off the grass she was sitting on and was gliding peacefully across the water’s surface. “Ooh! I’m moving! Is this swimming, Mr. Reiji?!”

“It sure is!”

I'd wondered what that "aquatic animal instinct" thing my medicine-making skill had mentioned was, and I figured I had my answer now. It was a fish's fundamental, inborn ability to swim the second it hatched, just like how most animals could stand upright soon after being born.

"Race, Mina!"

"Um... I'm not quite used to swimming yet!"

"Race, Master!"

"Hold your horses!"

I hadn't been sure how well this medicine would work, so I brought my bathing suit as well, just in case I had to teach Mina. After walking out of sight and changing into it, I noticed Griffy staring at me. "What's up?"

"Kyuu..." Griffy looked away, as if embarrassed.

Meanwhile, in the lake, Mina sounded thrilled. "So, this is what swimming's like! It feels amazing!"

When I came back in my swimsuit, Noela hurried me toward the water.

"Hey, hold on! I need to get ready."

"Noela win!"

"You probably will." *Man, how many years has it been since I went swimming?*

"Groo. Master no compete. Wet blanket."

"C'mon, don't pressure me."

Mina swam peacefully across the lake's surface. "I'll lose weight doing this, right?"

She's sure got tunnel vision about that.

With a pained grin, I prepared to race Noela. I'd already tried an easy stroke; much to my own surprise, I hadn't lost the ability to swim at all.

"Groo! Master fast?!" Watching me, Noela suddenly seemed eager to race again.

Mina, who was floating by the edge of the lake, signaled us to go, and our race began. In terms of swimming ability, Noela was way beyond me. I just barely stayed competitive thanks to my longer limbs. We wound up hitting the finish line simultaneously.

“Not bad, Master!”

“Thanks. I surprised myself,” I replied. *Ugh...I already feel like a ton of bricks. My body’s gonna be killing me tomorrow...*

Chapter 14:

Heatstroke

I SAT AT THE drugstore counter, staring outside. There were visible heat waves in the air.

“No wonder,” I mumbled.

The temperature explained the lack of customers. Kirio Drugs was located a bit awkwardly at the edge of town, so I understood why leaving home to visit the store was a bummer on a day like this.

Noela kept trying to latch on to me. Normally, I’d have been fine with that, but since she was super fluffy, I wished she’d give me some room during the summer. I was sweating like a pig, and no matter how much I hydrated, I still needed more water.

I watched as someone outside kind of wobbled toward the store. *Hmm? A customer in this heat? Did they really have to drop in today?*

“Reiji...?”

The visitor turned out to be the elf Ririka. Frankly, she looked like she was about to turn into a mummified elf.

“Welcome,” I said. “What brings you here on such a hot day?”

Ririka glanced around the store, appearing disappointed. “It’s nowhere near cool in here.”

“Sorry. This whole building’s pretty old,” I explained. *Did she come all this way to cool down? I may as well show some hospitality.*

I readied the rotating cooler Paula and I had collaborated on, inserting some icy gel, then poured lukewarm grape juice into the metal vessel.

“What’re you doing?”

“Just trying to give you a hand cooling off.” The vessel inside the machine spun as I turned the handle. I got a cup and poured juice in; the container was

so cold, I couldn't even hold it long. "Here you go."

"Grape juice?"

The rotating cooler was extremely powerful. About a third of the juice had frozen, turning the beverage into a kind of sorbet. "Have it while it's still cold."

"A-all right." Ririka lifted her thin eyebrows slightly, then she put the cup to her lips and drank. "Ah! I-It's chilly! And delicious."

"Awesome, right?" *Hats off to the craftsmen who made that rotating cooler possible.*

"It is."

Ririka took her time enjoying each sip of the cold drink. She'd looked exhausted and thirsty when she entered the drugstore, but now she had some of her usual fire back.

By the way, after I rejected Noela's attempts to cozy up to me, she'd fled to the basement under the living room—the room Mina's mother had used. We stored fruits and vegetables down there, since it was pretty cool.

"So," I asked Ririka, "what's up?"

"Folks in the forest are dropping like flies because of this heat."

"Er...will they be okay?"

"It seems like they'll get better if they rest a little. But, um, people are concerned it might be some kind of pandemic," Ririka explained, looking anxious.

Pandemic? I could see why she'd be worried. But it was summer, so food spoiled quickly. *It could just be food poisoning.*

"Even after drinking one of the drugstore's potions, they don't recover," Ririka added. "I've been trying to figure out what to do. I just don't know."

That's why she came all the way from the woods...

"Even my brother fell victim." Ririka looked as though she was on the verge of tears.

Once I'd listened to her explanation, another thought crossed my mind.

Heatstroke. Folks around Kalta said this summer was hotter than usual, with especially high forest temperatures.

“I always imagine the woods as being cooler,” I said.

“Cooler than town, yes. But, still, no one who lives there is used to this kind of heat.”

In other words, the elves’ bodies couldn’t adjust to the sudden shift in temperature.

“If this is what I think it is, it’s not a pandemic,” I assured Ririka.

“R-really?”

“Yeah. Don’t worry. I can’t say for sure, since I haven’t seen anyone afflicted, but I’m pretty sure it’s heatstroke.”

I think that’d explain why my potions didn’t help. They heal external wounds and stop blood loss. If they worked on heatstroke on any level, it’d be as hydration.

“Huh? R-Reiji, what’re you saying?!” Ririka blushed, embarrassed.

“Er...heatstroke?”

“Y-you said it *again*?! I mean, we’re in the store!”

“Uh...”

“L-Like, it’s still *noon*!” She stole a glance at me, cheeks bright red.

“Yeah. Hence the heatstroke.”

“You *repeated* it!”

“Why do you keep reacting to me saying heat—”

“I don’t want to talk dirty here! Th-this isn’t the right mood and atmosphere for my f-first time...” Ririka turned away.

What the hell is she talking about?

“I can’t believe you’d be so forward as to suggest *stroking* me,” she added.
“You’re a bigger playboy than I thought!”

“HEAT! STROKE!” I yelled, breaking into a sweat. Ririka was definitely only half

listening. *For Pete's sake! What a silly mistake.*

"You're being confusing."

"I'm not! I'm saying the name of a *medical* condition, not asking to touch you."

She looked a bit relieved. "Then you should call it something else! I'm sure other people would make the same mistake as me."

"Doubtful." I shook my head and sighed, then agreed to formulate a heatstroke treatment.

In the lab, I reflected on how people in this world fell back on drinking a potion whenever they felt at all ill. They needed to understand better that these potions weren't cure-alls.

I gathered the necessary ingredients and got to work.

Emergency Beverage: Hydrates even better than water. Mitigates dehydration induced by fever/excessive perspiration.

If those elves have heatstroke, this should help. You were supposed to drink something along these lines right away after feeling heatstroke's effects, so giving them the emergency beverage now might not be incredibly effective...but it was better than nothing. Anyhow, this heat wave might continue.

So far, I only produced a single dose of emergency beverage, so I whipped up enough to last ten people forty-eight hours. Once I finished mass-producing the drink, I headed back into the drugstore.

"I'm done, Ririka." I handed her the new product.

"Water?"

"It's not just ordinary water. It's special water that's effective against heatstroke."

"Ah. How much...?" She reached for her bag.

I stopped her. "I honestly don't know whether it'll work, so it's on the house."

“You know, I’m afraid someone might take advantage of you one of these days. You’re too nice for your own good.”

Maybe, maybe not. At any rate, I’d volunteered to make this emergency beverage prototype, and I didn’t know whether it would work as advertised. So, of course I wouldn’t ask Ririka for money.

“Since this isn’t a pandemic, could you come back to the forest too?” Ririka requested. “There’s a lot about heatstroke I just don’t understand.”

“Sure,” I nodded.

After telling Mina about the situation, I peeked into the basement. Noela was hugging the stone wall to cool off.

“I’m heading out for a bit, Noela. Watch the store.”

“Kay.”

Ririka helped me load the emergency beverages into a cart. Once everything was ready to go, I had Griffy pull the cart, and we headed for the woods.

The forest was undeniably much warmer than I’d expected, and tremendously humid. I got Griffy to wait at the edge of the woods so that the elves didn’t panic—so, once we entered the forest, I was the one pulling the cart of drinks.

“See? It’s hot, right?” Ririka already appeared to be melting.

Man, she must really have trouble with warm weather. I handed her a bottle of the new emergency beverage. “Try this. It should keep you in decent shape.”

“Th-thanks...” She uncapped the bottle and sipped it. “It’s not as good as a potion.”

“But it’s not so bad you wouldn’t drink it, right?” Emergency beverage tasted much more watered-down than a potion, so I could see why it’d be disappointing if you expected the same amount of flavor.

I spotted an exhausted, sweaty elf on their way back from hunting. “Ririka, give them an emergency beverage.”

“All right.” She approached them and explained the beverage; the elf began

to drink it. Returning, she complained, “Reiji, how in the world are you fine with this heat?”

“I’m not really sure how to answer that.”

I mean, I was hot. But compared to a scorching, humid Japanese summer, this was downright comfy. *I wonder if elves just naturally struggle with hot weather?*

I added, “My hometown was way hotter and more humid than this.”

“Your hometown...?”

Plus, Japan had air conditioners. You could cool off once you got inside.

I wiped sweat off my brow and continued forward. Every time the cart shook, I heard the bottles clacking against each other. Finally, we arrived in Ririka’s village. The last time I was here, there’d been more people outside, but right now, there was no one.

“Everybody’s in the shade to stay cool,” Ririka explained. “Most people are holed up at home.”

If they really were getting heatstroke, that was the right move—assuming their houses were cool inside, at least. “How’s the temperature indoors?”

“Better than being outside.”

Well, that’s good. “I never realized elves couldn’t handle hot weather...”

I wondered if I should’ve tried to make more emergency beverages to treat even more victims. I had a feeling that all the elves were predisposed to heatstroke.

“I guess I’ll leave all these emergency beverages with you, Ririka,” I decided. “If anyone gets heatstroke, give them a dose.”

“Sounds good.”

Let’s haul these over to her place then. The cart shook and rattled as I followed Ririka’s lead.

When we reached her house, she went in to check on her brother Kururu. I heard her ask, “How are you feeling, Brother?”

“Ah, Ririka. I’m glad you’re back. How was Reiji baby? Did he mention wanting

to see me?”

“Um...not at all. Your name didn’t even come up.”

“Whaaa...?! Th-that stings...”

Crap. If he realizes I’m here, this’ll get messy. Of course, I told Ririka earlier that I needed to see the people who had fallen ill before diagnosing them with heatstroke. Having run into a few elves on the way, however, I was pretty sure that was the issue. *I’ll just quietly leave the emergency beverages here and head out...*

“Reiji’s here,” I heard Ririka say.

“Huh? He is?!”

She came out of the house. “Sorry I made you wait. Could you check on my brother? He’s expecting you.”

Damn it. I missed my chance to fly the coop. “Y-yeah, of course. No worries.”

Ririka and I went back inside, and she opened the door to what was probably Kururu’s room.

Kururu lay in bed. “H-hey, Reiji baby...” He coughed, then croaked out some more words. “Thanks...for coming...all this way...to see me.”

Wait... I just heard him gabbing with Ririka! He’s playing this up!

Kururu gave the most exaggerated wheeze possible.

“B-Brother?! Just a moment ago, you were doing so well!”

He still is.

“You’re sure we aren’t facing a pandemic, Reiji?” Ririka looked deeply concerned.

“Reiji baby... I think...this might be it for me.” Kururu peered at me. I could feel him gauging whether I was concerned or not.

Please stop. “Nah. You’ll be fine.”

“I know...my body...better than anyone...”

“Could you stop talking like you have an incurable disease?” *Gosh, he is such a*

nuisance. “When did he get sick, Ririka?”

“The day before last.” In that case, Kururu probably wouldn’t have trouble recovering.

“I was sweating like crazy...as if all the water in my body drained away,” Kururu added.

So, he’s probably dehydrated too.

“I felt dizzy and nauseous,” Kururu continued. “Even now, I’m lightheaded...!”

“Reiji? Will Kururu be all right?” Ririka asked nervously.

“I’m pretty sure he’s already fine.”

He jumped out of bed at my blunt statement. “Th-there’s no way that’s true!”

Why do you want to stay sick? I figured he was fishing for my sympathy.

“Reiji baby...this is my last request. Please...let me lay my head across your lap.”

“Not happening.”

“I see... Thanks anyway, Reiji baby. I’m glad I saw you in the end. If I do pass away...try not to regret...turning down this opportunity.”

Now he’s trying to guilt-trip me? How many tricks does he have up his sleeve?

“You’re not going to die. Not from heatstroke, anyway.” I heaved a strained sigh. “I brought a bunch of emergency beverages. From now on, if you feel symptoms similar to before, drink one as quickly as you can.”

“Why’re you being so cold, Reiji baby? It’s been...so long since we last saw each other...”

What is he, my long-distance girlfriend? “I’m not trying to be cold.”

“Why not let me utilize your lap, then?!”

“You mean *lay your head* in my lap, right? Or is ‘utilize’ code for something else?”

“I think my brother’s all right, Reiji.” Ririka finally realized what was going on.

“Yeah. When I heard you two talking before I came in, it dawned on me that

he was doing fine.”

“Curses! I can’t believe I let that happen!” Kururu exclaimed, gripping his head in his hands.

I knew it. “I’ll be on my way, Ririka. If anyone else feels the way Kururu did, have them drink an emergency beverage as soon as possible, okay?”

“Got it.”

That was that. “But why *is* the forest so hot?” I wondered. “Do you have any idea, Kururu?” Kururu was already out of bed, and he’d fixed his hair to boot. *The guy’s not even trying to hide that he was faking it.*

“The forest’s usually quite cool,” he told me. “In fact, it’s never been this hot or humid. Even if the temperature rises, a cool breeze balances things out.”

“A cool breeze?” I repeated.

Ririka cut in. “Some people are saying the wind spirit might’ve caused this heat wave.”

“There’s a wind spirit?” *That doesn’t seem too odd, since there’s a lake spirit and all.*

“Yes. They’re a truly wonderful creature who’s blessed us elves. Thanks to them, we can use wind magic easily.”

“And some think the forest got this warm because the wind spirit isn’t causing any wind,” Kururu explained.

“Then...how do we solve that problem?”

“Well, the wind spirit mostly spends their time out of sight,” Ririka said. “They rarely reveal themselves to us.”

“So, we can’t just go talk to them easily?”

“Right. Even if you found them, they’d be difficult to communicate with unless a similar spirit was there.”

Ah. Well, we’ve got one of those working at the drugstore. “So, if we just ask the spirit to kick up some wind, that’ll take care of the heat wave.”

“If it were *that* easy, no one would be getting heatstroke,” Ririka said

skeptically.

“I think I have an in,” I assured her. “Let me see what I can do.”

With that, I left the elves’ house, hurrying to where I left Griffy.

Chapter 15:

Sylveen the Wind Spirit

I RODE GRIFFY TO Vivi's lake immediately and explained the situation to her.

"Wind spirit?" she repeated.

"Yeah. There's no breeze in the elves' forest, so the heat's making them sick."

"Oh. Got it. So, you want to ask for Sylvi's help... Which means you need *me*?!" Vivi's eyes sparkled.

Guess she's glad I came to her.

"Is 'Sylvi' the wind spirit's name?" I asked. Vivi had met them, clearly.

"Kind of. His real name's Sylveen."

Things are looking up! "So, you could visit him if you wanted?"

"Uh-huh," Vivi replied proudly. "You've got friends who can watch the drugstore, carry stuff, and even fly, but I'm probably the only one who could take you to meet a spirit!"

Griffy looked irritated. I patted its neck affectionately. "Don't worry, Griffy. You're tons of help."

"Kyuu! Kyuuuu!" Griffy flapped its wings happily.

"Why can't you say those things to *me*?" Vivi pleaded.

Shrugging her off, I asked, "So, where do we need to go to meet this fairy?"

"We're *spirits*!"

"Oh—my bad. That was a legit mistake."

"Jeez!" Vivi scowled but then revealed the details. "Sylveen definitely lives in the forest, just like I live in the lake. But... Well, I'll explain as we make our way there."

The two of us hopped onto Griffy. The griffin flew through the sky, following Vivi's directions.

“Spirits give blessings in exchange for faith,” Vivi explained en route.

“So, people gain blessings by believing, worshiping, and offering gifts to spirits?”

“Yeah, in theory. Festivals in spirits’ honor are another way to try and showcase your faith.”

“Using the term ‘showcase’ feels weirdly unpleasant.”

“You know, holding a festival for *me* would be totally fine, Reiji.”

“So, where *is* this wind spirit?”

“Don’t change the subject!” Vivi never forgot to give me grief. “Well, different spirits live in different locations—lakes, volcanoes, and so on—called ‘dwellings.’ Sylvi dwells at the bottom of a ravine, so it’s good that we’ve got Kyuu with us!”

Griffy beat its wings miserably, soaring through the air. The griffin clearly wasn’t fond of Vivi ordering it around as she gave directions. To add insult to injury, Vivi was the only one who called Griffy “Kyuu”; it almost never responded to the nickname.

I’ll have to give Griffy some meat later as thanks for flying us to Sylveen.

Just past the elves’ forest was a spot where it looked like the ground itself had been opened and torn apart.

“There!” Vivi told me.

Huh. So, that’s where Sylveen’s hiding. The elves said the wind spirit rarely appears in front of them, but even if you wanted to meet him, it’d be terribly difficult for most people. I could see why.

I had Griffy slow down as we flew into the crack in the ground. At the bottom was a small river, but there was no sign of any other animals or people. All I could hear was water flowing.

As Griffy landed in a safe spot, Vivi surveyed our surroundings. “Where are you, Sylvi...?”

“You sure this is the place?”

“Yup. Sylvi and I aren’t exactly friends, though. I don’t remember when we last saw each other, honestly.” As she wandered around, looking for the wind spirit, her voice echoed through the ravine. “Sylvi?! It’s me, Vivi! It’s been a while!”

“Do spirits have houses?” I asked her. When we visited Vivi, she always came out of her lake, but maybe she had a house underwater.

“I mean, we’re basically spiritual beings. Our dwellings kind of *are* our houses.”

“So...you don’t have one?” *How sad.*

“Stop pitying me! That’s just how it is for spirits!”

Suddenly, a gust of air blew through the ravine.

“Ah! Sylvi!” Vivi exclaimed. I hesitated, and she started talking to...nothing?
“Long time no see! How many years has it been?”

Is Sylveen only visible to Vivi? “Hey, is the wind spirit here...?”

“Yup!” Vivi confirmed. I couldn’t tell. “Don’t worry,” she added. “He’s totally okay, I promise.”

Then, just like that, a small boy appeared in the spot Vivi had spoken to.

“Whoa!” I cried. “He came out of nowhere.”

“This is the wind spirit,” Vivi told me.

Sylveen politely bowed his head.

“It’s a pleasure.” I nodded in return.

“So, Sylvi...” Vivi explained the situation.

Sylveen just shook his head with a troubled expression.

“Wha—?!” Vivi gasped. “Really?! That’s such a hassle!”

Wh-what’s going on? “Vivi, what’s up?”

“Sylvi can’t create breezes like he used to. He caught a spirit cold!”

What the heck’s that? I hadn’t known that spirits *could* catch colds.

“Spirit colds suck, Reiji. They’re super annoying. You get a headache, and a fever, and even chills!”

That’s just a regular cold. Seriously. “So, Sylveen catching a cold caused this heat wave?” In other words, the extra-hot weather has been because there’s been no wind whatsoever.

According to Vivi, I was right on the money. “The lands that spirits bless are called ‘sanctuaries,’” she explained. “Sylvi’s blessings affect his sanctuaries in tons of ways that flow over into other areas too. It makes sense that negative effects overflow the same way.”

She dipped her feet in the river as she spoke. *Right. I forgot Vivi can’t handle heat either.*

The impact of the lack of wind was showing up in small ways, even in our town. It was the worst in the elf forest Sylveen had blessed. At this rate, folks in Kalta would start getting heatstroke as well, and there’d be negative effects on crops soon enough.

“Reiji...?”

“Yeah, I know. I’ll make a treatment for spirit colds.” Sylveen looked about Noela’s age, which made me even more eager to help him.

“No worries, Sylvi!” Vivi assured him. “This guy here makes amazing medicine!”

Sylveen once again bowed his head to me. *What a polite little spirit.* This would’ve been easier if he’d been able to speak, like Vivi, but I didn’t expect a lot from spirits.

“I’ll whip something up, so you just sit tight,” I told him.

Vivi volunteered to stay with Sylveen, so I hopped back on Griffy and returned to the drugstore.

At the house, I announced my arrival to Noela and rushed by her.

“Groo? Master in hurry?”

“Hm? Oh, yeah. I’ve got to make something real quick.”

“Noela help!”

I wish she’d watch the store for me instead. We don’t seem busy though, so whatever. “Much obliged, partner.”

“Garoo! On it!”

I tousled Noela’s hair, and we headed to the lab. Once I’d jotted down the ingredients I needed, she grabbed them for me. However, one key ingredient—a type of moss apparently known as “magic moss”—couldn’t be found in Kalta.

“Where the heck do you get ‘magic moss’?” I muttered.

“Ejil time, Master.”

“Good call,” I agreed. “We’ve got a secret weapon named Ejil!” I was pretty sure the demon king had the day off though. “Hey, *Ejil*?! Can you hear me?” I cried, wondering whether he’d come.

Suddenly, a magic circle appeared in the air. Ejil fell through and landed dramatically on one knee. “What’s wrong, Doctor?”

“Sorry to drag you in on your day off.”

“No problem at all! It’s just that I’m a bit busy right now, so I can’t hang around too long.”

“Could you grab me something?”

“Hmm...” Ejil’s face was conflicted.

“It’s called magic moss,” I added.

“I’m so sorry, Doctor. I’d love to help right away, but today’s been a day.”

“Yeah...?”

“Some weirdo charged my castle, claiming he was a ‘salaryman’ in a previous life.”

Wha—?! Does that mean he reincarnated here? There’s someone else here that’s from Earth?!

“Will you be okay, Ejil? This ‘salaryman’ isn’t too strong, is he?”

“Gah ha ha! Doctor, you forget who I am,” Ejil said confidently.

“An awesome part-timer?”

“‘Awesome’...? Gosh! Erm...I don’t deserve your praise!”

You know, he really doesn’t come off as a demon king, I mused. I would’ve loved to hear more about this reincarnated salaryman guy, but Sylveen’s spirit cold came first. “Anyway, Ejil, is magic moss hard to find?”

“Very much so. If I weren’t in a hurry, I’d have my entire army hunt out every last bit, but...”

“I just need a little.”

“Arroo! Ejil no destroy nature!” Noela’s expression was fierce.

Ejil flinched. “I never knew you were so environmentally conscious.”

“He doomed, Master,” Noela told me with a look of despair, shaking her head.

“Fear not, Noela. The only one who’s doomed is that human man attacking my castle. I’ll annihilate him with a flick to the head!”

That’s not what she meant, Ejil.

“S-so, when this battle’s over...please marry me, Noela!”

Look at our little demon king, flying a death flag all on his own.

“No way. Not happen. Battle start, end, no marry.” Noela was as consistent as always. “Finding moss more important.”

With all the wind taken from his sails, Ejil was in no mood to get the magic moss I needed. “I’m just not motivated,” he complained. “All...all this rejection and hatred...! And on top of that, I constantly have to strive to ensure my underlings won’t underestimate me...”

He’s finally buckling.

“Master...?”

“Noela, in this kind of situation, it’s all about the stick and carrot.”

“Groo?”

You had to reward people sometimes, or they wouldn't feel motivated to do anything. "Ejil, if you grab that magic moss, I'll make you a fresh potion."

At the words "fresh potion," Noela's tail immediately wagged.

"Do you really think that'd make me happy, Doctor?"

I lowered my voice and whispered into his ear. "Maybe not *you*, but what about your beloved Noela?"

Ejil glanced at the werewolf girl, whose eyes screamed that she was desperate for a potion. "I'll do it!" he cried. "Yes! Let me! I'll find your magic moss!" Just like that, he teleported hurriedly from the lab.

"Groo...Ejil no listen to Noela," she complained.

"That's because you've still got to learn how to ask a favor. Ordering someone around won't always work, not even on Ejil."

Noela mulled that over. Meanwhile, I did as much work on Sylveen's treatment as I could without the magic moss. *That salaryman at Ejil's castle... Did he come from another world, like me?*

"Use this, Master?" Noela pointed at the panacea I'd placed safely on the shelf a while ago. Panacea wasn't something I could make easily, since getting your hands on a unicorn horn was nearly impossible.

"If Ejil can't find the magic moss we need, yeah." If I had a reason to use it, holding on to it would be pointless. And I couldn't leave Sylveen too ill to create wind, so...

"Got it."

However, it turned out that I probably wouldn't need the panacea. Just then, Ejil fell through a magic circle in midair. "Haaah... Haaah... Haaah... D-Doctor, I've got the moss you needed!"

Even for the demon king, teleportation magic was tough; he seemed pretty exhausted. His shoulders heaved as he handed me a leather bag.

Magic Moss: This rare organism's valuable extract is used in spiritual

medicine.

“Ooh, this is it!” I confirmed. “Thanks, Ejil.”

“Haah...Doctor, about our deal...”

“Hold your horses. I’ll make your potion right after I finish with this.”

Ejil flashed me a grin. “You’re a real villain, Doctor.”

“I don’t need the demon king telling me that,” I sighed. “So, what happened to that former salaryman?”

“He hit his limit and ran off.”

“Huh?”

“Fear not—I didn’t need to do anything to him! Gah ha ha ha ha!”

“I see.” That was all well and good for Ejil, but I would’ve liked to know more about the guy.

“Ready, Master!”

“Thanks.”

With my assistant Noela’s help, I completed the new treatment quickly.

Spirit Cure: Heals spiritual beings’ ailments and injuries.

Perfect. It was time to head back to Sylveen and Vivi.

Griffy flew me to the ravine where the two spirits were waiting.

“Hey!” I called. “I finished Sylveen’s medicine!”

“Fast as always!” Vivi called back, splashing her feet in the river. Sylveen sat beside her, splashing away as well.

He’s sick, right...? “Shouldn’t he be sleeping?”

“Mmm...yeah, probably. But I guess he’s happy to have visitors for once,” Vivi replied.

She must get how he feels. Sylveen certainly looked as though he was having fun. I handed Vivi the spirit cure. “You need to get him to drink this.”

“Sure thing!” Vivi turned to Sylveen. “If you drink this and rest, you’ll be back to normal in no time,” she explained.

For some reason, Sylveen’s expression was sad. *I wish I could understand what he’s saying.*

“I guess he’s feeling kind of lonely because he has a cold,” Vivi told me.

“What do you mean?”

“He’s kind of...scared? Though maybe that’s not the right word.”

“Er...I guess he wants to be looked after...? He wants company?” I sort of got it, even though I couldn’t articulate it.

Vivi tried to pass Sylveen the spirit cure, but he refused it. “Hey, this is medicine! It’ll make you feel better,” she repeated. The wind spirit shook his head.

I thought back to when Kururu had suffered from heatstroke. He’d tried every which way to grab my attention. For his part, Sylveen might be worried that everyone would ignore him again once he recovered.

“You’re close with Sylveen, right?” I asked Vivi.

“Me? Er...sort of, I guess.” Sylveen clearly heard her, and a sad expression crossed his face.

“Hey, he can hear you, you know,” I chastised her. “Don’t be like that.”

“You’re the *last* person who should tell me that!”

“Me? Did I do something?”

“You’re always a jerk about whether we’re friends or not! And about whether I can work full-time or not!”

I didn’t recall ever teasing her about our being friends, but that certainly sounded like something I’d do. “I’m pretty sure I’ve always said you’re a part-

timer, Vivi. I never mentioned anything about you working full-time. We don't even *have* full-time employees at Kirio Drugs."

I swear, this spirit never stops trying to get full-time hours! Why's she so fixated on it?

"Anyway, we're going off the rails," I continued. "I was saying that Sylveen's probably sad that we might leave when he recovers."

"Well, I was super lonely for *ages*, Reiji! Why're you paying so much attention to whether *Sylvi's* sad or not?" Vivi was clearly annoyed that I was treating Sylveen more sensitively, despite them both being spirits.

"If his cold doesn't get better, that'll cause tangible problems, right?" I reminded her. "I mean, look at the elves in the forest. They're getting sick from this heat wave."

Sylveen listened, looking apologetic. I felt kind of guilty; I wasn't trying to blame him.

"Why not swing by here sometimes, Vivi?" I suggested.

Sylveen's face lit up. *What an easy-to-read spirit.*

"Huh?!" Vivi cried.

"Do you have to be so obvious? If you *do* come by, I'll give you more shifts."

"Sure thing!"

That didn't take much. Now that I thought about it, I figured Vivi must really hate being alone too. Back in the day, people had worshiped spirits. I bet she must've enjoyed being relied on. Maybe that went for all spirits.

"Sylvi, I'll drop in from now on to play, all right?" the lake spirit promised him. "So, drink your medicine and rest."

"When Vivi visits, I'll come by too," I added. "You won't be alone like before."

Sylveen nodded with a grin and finally drank the spirit cure. Then he yawned and disappeared into thin air.

"Did he go off to sleep?" I asked.

"Probably." Vivi cleared her throat. "Reiji, I want seven shifts a week!"

“That’s literally one every day.”

She was acting like a college student requesting summer-vacation shifts. *What’s she need all those hours for?* Ejil needed shifts too, so if Vivi staffed the drugstore every day, there wouldn’t be enough shifts for Noela to work.

“Right,” I said. “I’ll think about it.”

“Thanks!”

Vivi already worked three shifts a week. At best, I could give her another day. If I scheduled her more often, I’d need to decrease Ejil’s hours, and he’d be unhappy about not seeing Noela.

As I put together the next month’s schedule in my head, Vivi and I headed home.

The next morning, I awoke to sunlight creeping into my bedroom.

“Whew! Talk about a good night’s rest.”

The heat had made it hard to sleep until yesterday evening, when a nice, cool breeze came in the window. I’d slept all the way through the night without getting drenched in sweat.

“I’m guessing Sylveen’s spirit cure worked,” I said.

The sun was glaring in the sky overhead, but the dry heat didn’t feel humid. It was kind of like Japan in May. I was betting that the elves’ woods were much cooler now, but I figured I might as well check.

Arriving at the village, I met folks going hunting, collecting water, doing laundry, and completing all kinds of other chores. Nobody was holed up at home anymore. And, to my joy, a cool, wonderful breeze blew through the village.

“Reiji!” Ririka ran up to me.

“Looks like everything’s all right now.”

“Yeah, it is! Did you meet the wind spirit?”

“Uh-huh. He caught a cold, and that brought on the heat wave. I gave him

some medicine, so I don't think we'll need to worry about the temperature anymore."

"Thank you so much. You really saved our butts. On behalf of this village, you have our gratitude!"

"Please. I'm just glad we figured out the problem quickly. If things kept going that way, we could've lost tons of crops."

"You're way too humble, you know that?"

"It's just the truth. How's Kururu?"

"Fighting...against his beard. He'll need to buy more shaving gel, I guess," Ririka grinned.

He does get a crazy bad five o'clock shadow.

Having confirmed that the weather in the elven village was fine, I headed back to the drugstore. There, I found Sylveen standing on his tiptoes, peeking through the window. He jumped repeatedly, trying to see inside.

"Need something?"

The wind spirit's shoulders flinched, and he turned around cautiously. Upon seeing me, however, he nodded several times.

"I'm glad you're doing better," I told him. "This breeze is nice and cool and everything. You spirits really are something else!"

When I complimented him, Sylveen blushed and looked away. Then, he pulled out a beautiful emerald stone and presented me with it.

"Um..." He pushed the stone toward me. "For me?"

Nod. Nod.

"Are you sure? This looks really valuable."

Nod. Nod.

"Is it a token of gratitude...?"

Nod. Nod.

"Thanks a lot, then. If you're ever bored, feel free to drop by and hang out,

okay?”

The wind spirit blinked several times in surprise.

“We’ve got all different types here,” I reassured him. “A ghost, a werewolf, a demon king, a spirit, a monster... You’d fit right in. Vivi works and visits regularly too.”

Sylveen grinned and waved, then disappeared into the wind.

This stone’s sure beautiful...

Wind Crystal: Crystallized breeze.

Whoa! That’s kind of incredible. Should a pharmacist like me really have this?!

I had no inkling how to use a wind crystal. Still, I figured the gift showed how much Sylveen appreciated what I’d done.

Heading back inside, I found Mina making breakfast in the kitchen. “Good morning, Mr. Reiji.”

“Morning, Mina.”

“Hmm? What’s that?”

“A gift.” I explained everything that had happened, starting with Ririka’s request.

“Oh my! I had no idea. Sylveen’s all right now, then? Thank goodness. No wonder it’s so cool today!”

“Exactly.”

“Breakfast will be ready soon. Could you wake Noela up?”

“You got it.” I’d slept like a rock myself, so I understood why Noela would still be asleep.

Heading to Noela’s room, I passed the open hallway window. A pleasant breeze came through it. I knocked on her door first, since she was a girl, but there was no answer. With few other options, I opened the door and saw Noela

asleep as always.

“Fresh potions!” I exclaimed.

“Garoo?!” Her eyes opened in seconds.

Now I know how to wake her up going forward. “Breakfast’s ready, buddy.”

“Groo...yeah.”

Noela rubbed her sleepy eyes, and we headed to the dining room. Just like that, another ordinary day began here at Kirio Drugs.

Afterword

HHEY, EVERYONE! Kennoji here.

I can't believe we've already hit Volume 6. Several chapters took place during the same season—summer, to be exact. However, regardless of the season, no one in this series ages or grows. We're playing by *Sazae-san* rules here, don't worry. We won't leap through time or anything.

This might seem sudden, but this story is being adapted into an anime! It'll air on Tokyo MX BS11 starting in July 2021.

The way Noela moves and speaks is especially adorable, so I implore you all to watch! A trailer's up on YouTube now. If you're curious about what vibe the show will have, go check it out.

Frankly, I still can't believe this is all happening. I've already checked things over, observed recording sessions, and so on, but it doesn't feel real. The show will premiere in about three weeks from now (I'm writing this in mid-June), but I find myself wondering when this'll all hit home.

As usual, the manga version of *Drugstore* is doing a great job of making all the characters adorable. Those of you who haven't read it yet are really missing out.

The only reason *Drugstore's* come this far is Hifumishobo, my editor, and the various other people supporting this project. When I stop to think about it, the power of a writer really is insignificant on its own.

I'm so grateful to everyone involved in the anime, the manga series, and these original novels. I'm also grateful to you, the readers. Thanks for coming with me on this journey. Because of your support, *Drugstore's* getting an anime adaptation. I plan to keep writing this relaxed pharmacist's story, so I hope you stick along for the ride.

Please look forward to future volumes of *Drugstore in Another World*!

—KENNOJI



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